

Book Review of *Discover, Connect, Respond: A Practical Approach to Trauma-Informed Instruction*



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ABSTRACT: This review examines the book *Discover, Connect, Respond* by Elise White Diaz and its contribution to trauma-informed instruction and culturally responsive teaching for multilingual learners in K-12 educational settings. In this review, the central themes and practical instructional approaches for a diverse multilingual student population are analyzed. The book review reflects on the provided teacher-friendly design with classroom tips, strategies, and effective activities for teachers to support relationship building and student engagement of learners with trauma as relevant to TESOL education, teacher preparation programs, and professionals who are currently working with multilingual learners.

Keywords: trauma-informed instruction, English language learners (ELLs), TESOL, culturally responsive teaching, classroom strategies

As the need for trauma-informed instruction increases, educators continue to seek practical resources to support classroom instruction. In her book, *Discover, Connect, Respond: A Practical Approach to Trauma-Informed Instruction*, Elise White Diaz challenges deficit orientations and offers a framework that invites teachers to understand students' responses to trauma rather than treat their responses as distractions or signs of disrespect. The central idea of the book focuses on relationship building, not behaviors. White Diaz emphasizes that when students feel safe, their brains shift from survival to engagement. This review discusses the organization of the book, outlines the key ideas, and highlights the relevance and practical value for educators who teach multilingual learners.

The book is organized into three sections. Part 1, *Discover*, emphasizes searching below the surface to understand students' behaviors. Part 2, *Connect*, helps teachers center emotional safety and offers ways to promote belonging as a foundation for meaningful learning. In Part 3, White Diaz introduces the notion of *Respond*. These chapters provide strategies to help teachers act with awareness and compassion, keeping the whole child in mind, while maintaining a balance between empathy and accountability.

A key strength of Part 1 is the way in which White Diaz prompts educators to examine cultural, emotional, and environmental factors that impact students' learning and to understand their individual experiences. She successfully establishes a strength-based mindset by providing authentic classroom examples throughout the section. Although the examples are relatable, expanding scenarios related to a wider range of trauma-related situations would strengthen their transferability to diverse classroom settings.

In Part 2, White Diaz moves to concrete, actionable strategies for developing trust and dealing with challenging behaviors. She establishes the need for authentic connections through instructional routines.

Similar to Part 1, the lesson examples for student expression are practical, but including examples from multiple content areas would broaden the section and provide more support for secondary teachers. Part 3 features trauma-informed principles being translated into specific classroom practices that can be implemented immediately. White Diaz offers step-by-step routines, concrete strategies, lesson examples, and fill-in-the-blank templates. This section is especially useful because it offers specific techniques and procedures on how to implement schoolwide systems of support.

Throughout the book, White Diaz showcases her Discover-Connect-Respond (DCR) framework, a pedagogical tool that bridges theory and practice by using classroom examples. She developed the framework to help educators better support students who experienced varying levels of trauma by introducing an approach for working with multilingual learners. It revolves around simple but transformative ideas. For example, before teaching content, it is crucial to discover who students are, connect with them by building trust, and respond by implementing practices that support healing and growth. White Diaz stresses the need to discover students' stories through observations, questions, surveys, journals, and conversations with family members. She notes that a critical step in trauma-informed practices is to create an environment where emotional safety and academic learning coexist, and where students' experiences are acknowledged and honored. According to White Diaz, teachers can do this by applying second-order thinking, such as attuning to the child and using stories to build connections. She encourages teachers to respond rather than react. To this end, White Diaz notes the importance of setting up one's classroom as a place of safety, teaching students how to self-regulate, and leading restorative conversations.

One of the book's most noteworthy aspects is the author's storytelling approach, which can help readers extend the DCR framework to view trauma-informed teaching as lived experience. White Diaz adopts a conversational yet professional tone that makes the text approachable for teachers across grade levels and content areas. Moreover, as noted above, the text is supported by real-life teaching examples and practical tools to guide educators. For example, in Chapter 1, White Diaz's SWOT (Strength/Weakness/Opportunities/Threats) analysis draws on information from student surveys and parent interviews to help foster a more complete understanding of students' strengths, needs, and circumstances. Thus, it supports individualized trauma-responsive instructional decisions. Later in Chapter 7, the author provides a problem-solution graphic organizer to help teachers set up their classroom as a place of felt safety to better address students' needs.

Despite the book's many strengths, a central weakness is that the author does not directly define trauma. And while the book is grounded in trauma-informed principles and supported by multiple scholarly sources, the concepts are often briefly introduced and may seem glossed. This was likely done to maintain the book's practical focus and appeal, but readers who are interested in a deeper understanding of the framework may need to consult additional sources.

White Diaz's book provides an avenue for treating ELL students as individuals rather than as labeled learners. It aligns with research conducted by Wilson et al. (2024), who elaborate on the need for educators to support ELLs who have experienced trauma in and beyond classrooms. White Diaz's work supports this idea by encouraging teachers to authentically connect with students in culturally responsive ways.

In their work with Latinx ELLs, Ijadi-Maghsoodi et al. (2025) underscored the connections between resilience and trauma and identified the need for trauma-informed SEL interventions and professional development. White Diaz directly addresses these needs by creating a step-by-step guide for identifying and responding to trauma in multilingual classrooms. She includes reflective questions and teacher-friendly models that enable teachers to see behaviors and responses as expressions of students' voice. Her DCR framework illustrates how teachers can employ trauma-informed approaches in everyday teaching. In doing so, she promotes collaboration with colleagues and families and reinforces shared responsibility.

White Diaz delivers a practical everyday guide to trauma-informed practices by introducing a framework that enables educators to meet ELL students' academic and emotional needs. By offering a variety of practical tools, the author presents a wealth of actionable, teacher-friendly resources. Overall, this book is a particularly valuable resource for K–12 educators who work with multilingual learners and students who have experienced trauma in their lives, instructional coaches, and teacher educators who are committed to creating a safe, inclusive trauma-informed and relationship-centered learning environment.

The Author

Viktoriia Kisil is a public school educator and a Ph.D. student specializing in ELL instruction and multilingual learners. Her teaching experience includes working with a culturally and linguistically diverse population of students. She worked with students on different levels of English proficiency across grade levels, including elementary, middle, and high school in the U.S. and Ukrainian public schools as well as university-level students at Southeast Missouri State University. In addition, Viktoriia worked with international organizations teaching students from Afghanistan and Colombia. She is currently pursuing a Doctor of Philosophy degree in Education in Curriculum and Instruction with an emphasis on Language, Literacies, and Culture at Southern Illinois University.

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