

Traumatic societal events may undermine classroom behavior interventions for certain groups, study finds

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As a researcher of student mental health and well-being, Keith Herman has found that, in general, offering students more positive

encouragement rather than negative reprimands not only reduces disruptive student classroom behavior but can also improve students' academic and social outcomes.

However, in a recent study, Herman found that in the midst of traumatic societal events—such as a neighborhood shooting—positive [classroom](#) behavior management interventions may not have the desired outcomes for certain individuals who could be struggling with trauma or depression associated with such an event.

Herman, a Curators' distinguished professor of educational, school and counseling psychology in the MU College of Education and Human Development, implemented CHAMPS, a classroom behavior management training intervention for teachers, into a St. Louis County school district's middle school classrooms from 2013 to 2017. The intervention emphasized communicating clear expectations to students, giving more positive encouragement compared to negative reprimands, and moving around the classroom to monitor [student](#) behavior.

Herman found that, in general, the intervention resulted in fewer disruptive classroom behaviors and student concentration problems, as well as an increase in completed class work, standardized [test scores](#), and the amount of time students remained on task with classroom assignments—all of which led to more engaged learning.

However, given the traumatic shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014, Herman was motivated to examine what impact that event had on the mental health and well-being of students and teachers in the St. Louis County school district where the CHAMPS intervention was implemented.

Herman reanalyzed the [same data set](#) from his previous CHAMPS study, a randomized, controlled trial involving more than 100 middle school

teachers and 1,450 students. He found that while the positive student achievement benefits impacted both white and Black students equally before the shooting, the student achievement benefits disappeared for Black students after the shooting.

"It's possible this traumatic historical event happening so close to these students may undermine some youth's ability to benefit from these positive classroom interventions," Herman said. "If you feel threatened or unsafe based off the trauma from that event, you might become more distracted, frustrated and less able to pay attention in class, which may impact academic achievement."

Herman also found the overall CHAMPS [intervention](#) to be more beneficial to Black teachers before the shooting compared to after, and specifically the ratio of providing positive encouragement to students compared to negative reprimands sharply declined for Black teachers after the shooting. One surprising finding was teachers reported Black students actually increased their displays of prosocial behavior, including being kind, compassionate and helpful to others, after the shooting compared to before.

"Our main goal is to promote supportive interventions so youth learn to feel good about themselves and be optimistic about their future, and this study highlights the complexity of these goals, as our efforts to create nurturing environments need to be attentive to all aspects of context," Herman said. "We already know Black youth experience higher rates of disproportionate discipline practices, are more likely to be suspended or expelled, and the school-to-prison pipeline is well documented. When Black youth are exposed to traumatic racial events where people who look like them are being harmed, that can potentially undermine what the positive interventions are trying to accomplish."

Herman added that while the shooting of Brown was the traumatic event

analyzed in this particular study, the findings highlight how traumatic societal events in general may undermine the mental health and well-being for particular individuals. These impacts could potentially interfere with classroom interventions that are designed to be beneficial.

"Other possible examples could be if the events of Sept. 11, 2001, disproportionately impacted children of first responders or if there is a coal mining tragedy near a [school](#) district with many children of coal miners," Herman said. "As scientists and researchers, we sometimes have this façade of objectivity by rigorously designing randomized, controlled trials, often considered the gold standard for eliminating bias. But in reality, it is often more nuanced depending on a historical traumatic event. Our science will get stronger and richer, if we spend more time thinking about potentials for bias or events that maybe influenced the findings."

The findings could help principals, [school administrators](#) and superintendents brainstorm possible counseling resources for students and teachers or bring in professionals trained in facilitating discussions about traumatic events.

Having been at MU for 15 years, Herman is co-director of the Missouri Prevention Science Institute and National Center for Rural School Mental Health, co-developer of the Boone County Family Access Center of Excellence and a board member for the Boone County Schools Mental Health Coalition.

"I am passionate about creating positive, nurturing environments for students and teachers where everyone can thrive and be successful," Herman said. "Doing that reduces risks for [mental health](#) problems and promotes positive well-being and an overall better society."

"Accounting for traumatic historical events in educational randomized

controlled trials" was recently published in *School Psychology Review*.

More information: Keith C. Herman et al, Accounting for Traumatic Historical Events in Educational Randomized Controlled Trials, *School Psychology Review* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/2372966X.2021.2024768](https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2021.2024768)

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