Creating a Trauma Informed Environment for English Language Learners

Stephanie M. Cedeño, LCSW & Nivia Rojas-Lopez, LPC

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Fact: One out of every four children attending school has been exposed to a traumatic event that can affect learning and/or behavior.

“In a TRAUMA-INFORMED school, the adults in the school community are prepared to recognize and respond to those who have been impacted by traumatic stress. Those adults include administrators, teachers, staff, parents, and law enforcement. In addition, students are provided with clear expectations and communication strategies to guide them through stressful situations. The goal is to not only provide tools to cope with extreme situations but to create an underlying culture of respect and support”.

TRAUMA
THE TRAUMA EQUATION

TRAUMA = The SUM of EVENTS, EXPERIENCE & EFFECTS

EVENTS
Events or circumstances may include the actual or extreme threat of physical or psychological harm or the severe withholding of resources for healthy development.

EXPERIENCE
An event may be experienced as traumatic by one person and not another.

The experience may be influenced by cultural beliefs and the developmental stage of the individual.

EFFECTS
Adverse effects may occur immediately or over time.

Effects may include physical, mental, emotional, cognitive, behavioral, social and spiritual challenges.
Domestic Violence
Refugee Trauma
Complex Trauma
Neglect
Sexual Abuse
Physical Abuse
Early Childhood Trauma
Bullying
Terrorism
Natural Disasters
Migration Trauma
School Violence
Community Violence
Medical Trauma
Harrison, 17 years old.

I was born in El Salvador and came to this country two years ago. My mother left to the United States to find work when I was 5 years old. She left me and my younger brother in the care of my Uncle who wasn’t very nice and would mistreat us. We were very poor and my uncle would use the money my mother would send him for alcohol. I tried to attend school but I needed to provide for my brother and I. When I turned 13 I stopped going and instead began to work. In my area there were a lot of violence due to gangs and I saw many of my close friends get killed because they would not join the gang or they did something to anger the gang. At 15 I decided to escape my country because I didn’t want to be a part of the gangs. I wanted to go find my mother.

I made my journey through Mexico to cross the border into the US. I had to pay the coyotes a lot of money, but when I ran out along the way they held me with a gun in my face and called my family in the United States to force them to send more money or I would get killed. Once I was free I made my way across the border and walked through a very hot desert where Immigration found me and put me into a juvenile detention center. After they reunited me with my mother’s family in New Jersey, I had a very tough time getting used to this new environment. I finally was able to see my mother, but our relationship was never the same. We have many problems and I feel angry that she left us so long ago. I feel a lot of anger and sadness. I love soccer so I have become a part of our soccer team which has helped me with my anger and sadness. I hope to be able to find a good job so that I can bring my younger brother.
**Migration Stages with Traumatogenic Potential:**

- Pre-Migration Trauma
- Trauma During Transit
- Resettlement

CORE STRESSORS

Traumatic Stress
Occurs when a child experiences an intense event that threatens or causes harm to his or her emotional and physical well-being.

Resettlement Stress
Stressors that children and families experience as they try to make a new life for themselves.

Acculturation Stress
Stressors that children and families experience as they try to navigate between their new culture and their culture of origin.

Isolation Stress
Stressors that children and families experience as minorities in a new country.

We all have normal alarm systems in our brain/body that let us know when we are under threat and mobilizes us to either:

**FIGHT**

**FLEE (FLIGHT)**

**or**

**FREEZE**

When youth experience continuous threats/trauma, the brain/body is put into a chronic state of fear, activating the “survival brain” (mid/lower areas of the brain. This can create a faulty and overactive alarm system in their developing brain.

When youth are in a triggered state, they may not be able to access higher functions of the frontal lobe “learning brain”.

Trauma and Resilience: An Adolescent Provider Toolkit; Adolescent Health Working Group 2013
SURVIVAL RESPONSE:

Fight, Flight or Freeze

**Fight:** Youth struggle to regain or hold onto power, especially when feeling coerced. **Youth often mislabeled as “noncompliant” or “combative”**.

- **HYPER-AROUSAL** (constantly on edge)

**Flight:** Youth disengages or runs away and “checks out” emotionally. **Youth often mislabeled as “uncooperative” or “resistant”**

- **DISASSOCIATION** or **AVOIDANCE**

**Freeze:** Youth gives in to those in positions of power; does not, or is unable to “speak up.” **Youth often mislabeled as “passive” or “unmotivated”**
COMMON TRAUMA TRIGGERS THAT MAY ACTIVATE THAT SURVIVAL BRAIN:

- Unpredictability
- Sudden Changes or Transitions
- Loss of Control
- Sensory Overload
- Vulnerability
- Being Confronted
- Rejection
- Intimacy
THE EFFECTS OF TRAUMA ON SCHOOLS AND LEARNING

*How students process trauma depends on their age and level of development.*

Overall Effects on Students

✦ Ongoing feelings of concern for their own safety and the safety of others.

✦ Preoccupied with thoughts about their actions during the event, often experiencing guilt or shame over what they did or did not do at the time.

✦ Constant retelling of the traumatic event, or may describe being overwhelmed by their feelings of fear or sadness.

The Effects of Trauma on Schools and Learning. (n.d.) retrieved from: http://www.netsn.org/resources/audiences/school-personnel/effects-of-trauma
Recent studies have shown that traumatic experiences in childhood can diminish concentration, memory, and the organizational and language abilities children need to succeed in school.

Learning about the impacts of trauma can help keep educators from misunderstanding the reasons underlying some children’s difficulties with learning, behavior and relationships.

IMPACT ON LEARNING, BEHAVIOR AND RELATIONSHIPS AT SCHOOL

Childhood Trauma and Academic Performance:

- Trauma has the power to disturb the fundamental foundations for learning: reading, writing, solving math problems, ability to self-regulate attention, emotions and behavior.

- Trauma can undermine the development of language and communication skills, thwart the establishment of a coherent sense of self, compromise the ability to attend to classroom tasks and instructions, interfere with the ability to organize and remember new information, and hinder the grasping of cause-and-effect relationships—all of which are necessary to process information effectively.

IMPACT ON LEARNING, BEHAVIOR AND RELATIONSHIPS AT SCHOOL

Childhood Trauma and Classroom Behavior:

- For many children who have experienced traumatic events, the school setting can feel like a battleground in which their assumptions of the world as a dangerous place sabotage their ability to remain calm and regulate their behavior in the classroom.

- Many of the effects of traumatic experiences on classroom behavior originate from the same problems that create academic difficulties: the inability to process social cues and to convey feelings in an appropriate manner.

- Whether a child who has experienced traumatic events externalizes (acts out) or internalizes (withdraws, is numb, frozen, or depressed), a child’s behavioral response to traumatic events can lead to lost learning time and strained relationships with teachers and peers.

IMPACT ON LEARNING, BEHAVIOR AND RELATIONSHIPS AT SCHOOL

Childhood Trauma and Relationships:

- Children’s struggles with traumatic stress and their insecure relationships with adults outside of school can adversely affect their relationships with school personnel and with peers.

- Preoccupied with their physical and psychological safety, children who have experienced traumatic events may be distrustful of adults and/or fellow students and unsure of the security of the school setting in general.

- They may also suffer delays in the development of age-appropriate social skills. They may not know how to initiate and cultivate healthy interpersonal relationships with their teachers or their peers.

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Pyramid: Origins of Risk Factors

Trauma and Resilience: An Adolescent Provider Toolkit; Adolescent Health Working Group 2013
YOUR ROLE IN THEIR JOURNEY
“The Core Experiences of psychological trauma are *disempowerment* and disconnection. Recovery, therefore, is based upon empowerment of the survivor and the **creation of new connections**. Recovery can take place only in the context of relationships; it cannot occur in isolation. In her renewed connections with other people, the survivor re-creates the psychological faculties that were damaged or deformed by the traumatic experience. These faculties include the basic capacities for trust, autonomy, initiative, competence, identity and intimacy.”

-Judith Herman, M.D.
https://www.thersa.org/discover/videos/rsa-shorts/2013/12/Brene-Brown-on-Empathy
STRATEGIES FOR TEACHERS

So what can teachers do to help students in their classrooms who have experienced trauma?

1) Recognize that a child is going into survival mode and respond in a kind, compassionate way.
   “What’s happening here?” vs. “What’s wrong with this child?”

2) Create calm, predictable transitions.
   The important thing is to build a routine around transitions so that children know: a) what the transition is going to look like, b) what they’re supposed to be doing, and c) what’s next. STRUCTURE IS KEY*

3) Praise publicly and criticize privately.
   “Nurture the hell out of these children.” Capture those moments when the student is doing really well and point it out to build his or her self-worth: “Wow, I love how you sat at your desk for a whole five minutes” or, “Thank you for helping your classmate.” When you need to re-direct the behavior, do so privately and in as calm a voice as possible. - Rick Hanson

So what can teachers do to help students in their classrooms who have experienced trauma?

4) **Adapt your classroom’s mindfulness practice.**

If you use mindfulness in your classroom, you might consider using the following adaptations that the UCSF HEARTS program and Mindful Schools created:

- Tell students that, if they wish, they can close their eyes at the beginning of the practice. Otherwise, they should look at a spot in front of them so that no one feels stared at.
- Instead of focusing on how the body feels, have students focus on a ball or other object they’re holding in their hands—what it feels like and looks like in their palm.
- Focus on the sounds in the room or of cars passing outside the classroom—something external to the body.

5) **Take care of yourself.**

Put your oxygen mask on first. Self-care is #1 so that you prevent compassion fatigue and burnout.

CORE ATTRIBUTES OF A TRAUMA SENSITIVE SCHOOL

- A shared understanding among all staff

- The school supports all children to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, and academically

- The school addresses students needs in holistic ways, taking into account their relationships, self-regulation, academic competence, and physical and emotional well-being.

- The school explicitly connects students to the school community and provides multiple opportunities to practice newly developing skills.

- The school embraces teamwork and staff share responsibility for all students.

- Leadership and staff anticipate and adapt to the ever-changing needs of students.

THE FLEXIBLE FRAMEWORK: SIX ELEMENTS OF SCHOOL OPERATIONS INVOLVED IN CREATING A TRAUMA-SENSITIVE SCHOOL

- Leadership
- Professional Development
- Access to Resources and Services
- Academic and Nonacademic Strategies
- Policies and Protocols
- Collaboration with Families

EVERY KID IS ONE CARING ADULT AWAY FROM BEING A SUCCESS STORY.

-Josh Shipp
Nivia Rojas-Lopez, LPC: 201-348-5400 ext. 6535 nrojas@union-city.k12.nj.us

Stephanie M. Cedeño, LCSW: 201-330-8150 ext. 1255 scedeno@union-city.k12.nj.us

THANK YOU!