

A Workshop Series Summary

Transforming Teaching Through Understanding Trauma

Understanding the nature of trauma, and its impact on student learning, is vital for quality teaching. This short paper summarizes some of the insights of neuroscience, and their implications for training teachers and classroom practice.

The need for a trauma-sensitive lens

For many educators across the world, the COVID-19 crisis was a wake up call. When schools closed, teachers tried to find ways to support their students. As they did so, they saw the reality of the struggles many of their students were facing. Many of the students who we seek to serve experienced traumatic stress during the COVID-19 crisis. Often, this builds on struggles they have been living with throughout their lives, and which frequently have been present for generations in their families and community. Trauma caused by factors such as poverty, food scarcity, community violence, racism and so on. It was a reminder that students' lives do not start and stop as they enter the school gates, and that learning takes place in the context of the student's life as a whole. The latest insights in the neuroscience of learning and development give us valuable resources to understand the impact of trauma on our students' brains and to build our practice to support our students holistically.

Key insights

From the collective exploration in partnership with Medstar Georgetown WISE Center, five key insights were developed.

1. No learning without safety and connection

This is a highly simplified model to help understand the complex neurological systems that support relationships and learning.

The brain stem (red) is really the primitive part of our brain that takes care of our basic daily needs- breathing, sleeping, essentially just keeps us alive. The limbic system (blue) is the emotional regulator in our brain and is also the part that houses memory. The neocortex (green) is where the executive systems are housed and is the part that we most frequently ask our students to use for organizing and analyzing information.

THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

To explore this topic, and find practical ways forward for teachers, Teach For All hosted a series in partnership with the **Medstar Georgetown WISE Center** attended by 80 teachers, coaches and Heads of Training from 4 countries.. The goal was to identify how we can support our students and participants through the lens of a trauma-informed practice. Medstar Georgetown WISE Center links rigorous academics with mental wellness to improve academic and mental health outcomes.

The series consisted of four sessions, building from core breakthroughs of neuroscience, through to the practical implications for teachers. The flow of the sessions was as follows:

Understanding **neural connectivity, neurological systems** and the **impact of childhood experiences** on how our brain functions.

Understanding **how adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) impact the way we show** up in the classroom.

Identifying the **concrete teacher practices that make a difference**, such as non-contingent acknowledgement, relationship building and **integrating socioemotional learning** into daily practice.

Exploring **teacher wellbeing** and how **self-care for educators is key** to enable a trauma-sensitive classroom environment.

The brain has hierarchical needs: **Safety, Connection** and then **Problem Solving** (Figure 1). Problem-solving endeavours like schoolwork and conflict resolution skills will be more successful after you have established safety and connection. The child’s brain must be able to answer both, “Am I safe?” and “Am I loved?” in the affirmative in order to achieve an optimal brain state for learning.

2. Design all learning experiences assuming students have experienced trauma

Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) are potentially traumatic events that occur during childhood (0-17 years). The **Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) study** in the U.S. was one of the largest studies that helped see associations between adverse childhood experiences, health and social outcomes. While the initial study focused on abuse, neglect and household dysfunction; the later studies expanded to include environmental factors such as racism, poverty, community violence, food scarcity etc.

Prolonged exposure to ACEs can cause toxic stress (extended or prolonged stress). Toxic stress from ACEs can change brain development and affect such things as attention, decision-making, learning, and response to stress.

The study found that about 61% of adults surveyed across 25 states reported that they had experienced at least one type of ACE, and nearly 1 in 6 reported they had experienced four or more types of ACEs. Given the study was focussed on a while, middle-class, US demographic, this suggests that the potential prevalence of ACEs in the context in which Teach For All partners teach may be very high

For instance, **our participants from India reflected on the caste system** as a source of inter-generational trauma and its implications for their students. As Anjali Mishra from Teach For India put it: “The contexts are wide-ranging, however the consequences remain just as severe for every child.”

We learnt that creating and sustaining safe, stable, nurturing relationships and environments for all children and families can stop ACEs from having a toxic impact on the brain. We discussed the real challenge of stereotyping and the assumptions we hold about students and communities who may have experienced trauma.

It led us to say that teaching assuming that all of our students have experienced some sort of trauma (*without necessarily knowing every child’s individual ACE score*) and designing learning experiences that prioritize safety and relationships would benefit everyone in the learning environment. Mei Yee Chew, from Teach For Malaysia, reflected that “This is really pushing me to think about how we bring our past into the current spaces we’re in

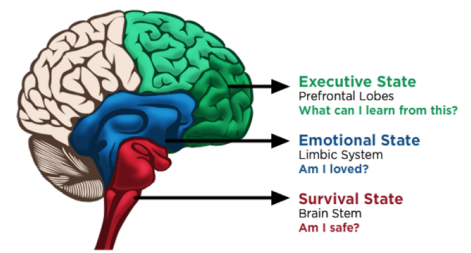


Figure 1 The brain has hierarchical needs: Safety, Connection and then Problem Solving.

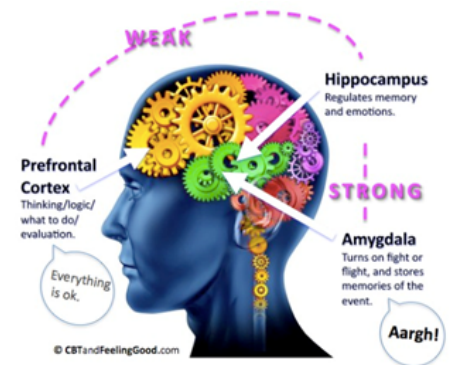


Figure 2 The Amygdala is meant to flare up and responds in “fight or flight” mode to keep us safe — which induces stress to cause us to act.

(whether in the program or classrooms) and how do we shape programs or the classroom environment while taking into consideration our past.”

3. Creating a serve-and-return relationship

Child-adult relationships that are responsive and attentive—with lots of back and forth interactions—build a strong foundation in a child’s brain for all future learning and development. This is called “*serve and return*.”

Having a serve-and-return relationship with students promotes an internal locus of control and empowers them to succeed. When we are responsive to our babies and children, their brains make neural-connections that give them a sense of who they are and how they impact the world around them. These neural-connections in the brain say, “I can make a change for myself and others!”

This could look like 3-5 minutes of reflective, interactive play for younger children and 5-8 minutes of reflective, interactive conversations in older children. In both cases, we focus on this time together being:

- Non-contingent and predictable
- Student-directed
- Avoiding questions, directives, or criticisms as much as possible

4. Don’t ask “what is wrong with you”, ask “what happened and how can I help”

Starting with the belief that “all children do well if they can” helps us shift our orientation from “what is wrong with you” to “what happened to you and how might we help”.

As educators, we need to shift our mindset to think that:

- All challenging behaviors and emotions occur under the conditions of demands being placed on a student exceeding the capacity to respond adaptively.
- The student who is at the centre of the problem knows more than anyone how to solve for it.

Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) can serve as a foundation for a helping, trusting, and collaborative relationship (Figure 3). By sitting down with the student, identifying a problem, empathizing, and brainstorming solutions, you are actually teaching them and practising with them a skill they don’t yet have. We learnt specific conversation prompts and strategies to practice empathy as we walk through these steps with the students.

We reflected on how this process is best used when we set up a dedicated

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– Mei Yee Chew, Teach For Malaysia



Figure 3 Collaborative Problem Solving (CPS) can serve as a foundation for a helping, trusting, and collaborative relationship.

time when things are calm to talk to a student as opposed to during a crisis. During a crisis or an escalation, it is best to focus on the goals of **safety and regulation**. We need to break the amygdalar loop and make sure their brain can answer the questions of “Am I safe?” and “Am I loved?” using language that is **pre-established and pre-learned**.

5. Self-care for educators is the foundation for trauma-based practice

Classroom trauma for teachers can be defined as traumatic events and/or chronic stress incurred by teachers (e.g., being aggressed against, chronic anxiety about classroom unpredictability). Typically teachers at-risk would be those with:

- Underdeveloped classroom management skills
- Poor coping/high anxiety or perfectionism
- History of trauma
- Highly demanding classrooms

Alongside strong foundational teaching skills, teacher wellbeing deserves measurement, diagnostic data and achievement data, and strong strategic planning, just like anything else we would do in teaching.

We learnt a few strategies on practising mindfulness such as the **5 senses exercise** (Figure 4) that help teachers model a mindful presence when it’s most needed, allowing them to pay better attention to the learning environment and the needs of the students within the classroom.

Further Reading and Resources

If you are interested in pursuing your learning on this topic, you can find a few resources below to get you started. *Note: We acknowledge that these resources are primarily from the U.S. context, and we are intentionally growing our understanding of how to best learn about and support students and educators across diverse contexts.*

- **Glossary** of a few often used terms in this space
- The abridged videos of each of the workshops:
Video 1: **Understanding the brain**, Video 2: **Understanding ourselves**,
Video 3: **Classroom strategies**, Video 4: **Teacher Wellbeing**
- ***The Deepest Well: Healing the Long-Term Effects of Childhood Adversity*** by Nadine Burke Harris
- ***Lost at School: Why Our Kids with Behavioral Challenges are Falling Through the Cracks and How We Can Help Them*** by Ross Greene
- **MedStar WISE Resources Page** with a special focus on the Teacher Wellbeing Workbook
- **Harvard University Stress and Development Lab**
- **POISE Wellbeing Self-Assessment Scale**

“Teacher wellbeing deserves measurement, diagnostic data and achievement data, and strong strategic planning, just like anything else we would do in teaching.”

Notice	Notice 5 things you can see
Notice	Notice 4 things you can feel
Notice	Notice 3 things you can hear
Notice	Notice 2 things you can smell
Notice	Notice 1 thing you can taste

Figure 4 The 5 senses exercise helps teachers model a mindful presence.