Survival Brain vs. Learning Brain: Understanding the Impact of Trauma In the Lives of Refugee and Immigrant Students
What is Trauma?

Trauma may involve a single experience, enduring repeated experiences, or multiple experiences that completely overwhelm an individual’s ability to cope.

- “Tough times,” while they do cause suffering and grief, don’t all rise to the level of trauma.
- Trauma healing requires outside support in the same way a cast holds a broken bone.
According to the ACES study, the rougher your childhood, the higher your risk for both health and behavior problems.

An **ACES score** is a tally of Adverse Childhood Experiences.
While you were growing up, during your first 18 years of life:

1. Did a parent or other adult in the household often:
   Swear at you, insult you, put you down, or humiliate you?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

2. Did a parent or other adult in the household often:
   Push, grab, slap, or throw something at you?
   or
   Ever hit you so hard that you had marks or were injured?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

3. Did an adult or person at least 5 years older than you ever:
   Touch or fondle you or have you touch their body in a sexual way?
   or
   Try to or actually have oral, anal, or vaginal sex with you?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

4. Did you often feel that:
   No one in your family loved you or thought you were important or special?
   or
   Your family didn’t look out for each other, feel close to each other, or support each other?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

5. Did you often feel that:
   You didn’t have enough to eat, had to wear dirty clothes, and had no one to protect you?
   or
   Your parents were too drunk or high to take care of you or take you to the doctor if you needed it?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

6. Were your parents ever separated or divorced?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

7. Was your mother or stepmother:
   Often pushed, grabbed, slapped, or had something thrown at her?
   or
   Sometimes or often kicked, bitten, hit with a fist, or hit with something hard?
   or
   Ever repeatedly hit ever at least a few minutes or threatened with a gun or knife?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

8. Did you live with anyone who was a problem drinker or alcoholic or who used street drugs?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

9. Was a household member depressed or mentally ill or did a household member attempt suicide?
   Yes No
   If yes enter 1

10. Did a household member go to prison?
    Yes No
        If yes enter 1

Now add up your “Yes” answers: ______ This is your ACE Score

Meant for professional medical use only; not for teachers to do with students

* Note the American version is one page, International ACEs is five pages
Lasting Impact of Trauma

People with an ACE score of 4+ are...

- 2 x more likely to be diagnosed with cancer
- 6 x more likely to have sex before the age of 15
- 7 x more likely to be alcoholics
- 12 x more likely to die from suicide
- 32 x more likely to have learning or behavior problems
- More likely to have life expectancy shortened up to 20 years
EL Newcomers

**Immigrant** - Person who moves to another country permanently

**Migrant** - Person who has moved recently/moves frequently
- May or may not have legal status

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Status With Path to Citizenship</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Refugee</td>
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<td>Asylee</td>
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<td>Special Immigrant Visa (SIV)</td>
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<td>Family-Based Visa</td>
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<td>Diversity Lottery Visa</td>
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<th>No Path to Citizenship</th>
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<tr>
<td>DACA / Dreamers</td>
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<td>Visitor Visa</td>
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<td>Student Visa</td>
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Refugee:

A person fleeing his or her country because of war, violence, persecution or a well-founded fear of persecution on account of race, religion, nationality, political opinion or membership in a particular social group.

~ No one chooses to be a refugee ~
“Forcibly Displaced”

Persecution, ethnic cleansing, human rights violations...

What hard truths are these words attempting to sanitize for the comfort of the American news consumer?

Is it fair not to look?
Save The Children  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBQ-IoHfmQ
Asylum Status

**Asylum** is a form of protection available to people who:

- Meet the definition of refugee
- Are already in the United States, or
- Are seeking admission at a port of entry

**Asylum Seeker:** Protection claim has not yet been determined

**Asylee:** Protected status has been granted
Unaccompanied: Alone in America https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6ztvPsJmIcU
Unaccompanied Minors

- Refers to status at border crossing/arrival, not current living situation
- Possibly living with unfamiliar guardians
- Unrelated guardians may not be heavily invested in the student’s well-being
- May be expected to ‘earn their keep’
- Depending upon individual status, may or may not qualify for services such as Medicaid
Potential Encounters With Trauma

- **Pre-flight**: The initial threats to a person’s security in home country
- **Flight**: The dangers and insecurity faced on the journey towards refuge and/or while living in a refugee camp
- **Post-flight**: Difficult resettlement adjustments
Understanding Trauma – Jacob Ham  https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KoqaUANGvpA
Brain Function

1) **The hindbrain ("reptilian" brain);** evolutionarily the oldest part of our brain; comprises the brain stem and cerebellum; controls essential functions we don’t have to think about like breathing, heart beating, etc.

2) **The mid-brain (limbic system);** the “emotional center”; comprised of the amygdala (fear/danger), the hippocampus (memory), the thalamus (sensory information), and the hypothalamus (messenger between midbrain and hindbrain).

3) **The forebrain (neocortex);** responsible for language, abstract thought, perspective-taking, and executive function.
Fight, Flight, or Freeze

- When fight, flight, or freeze mode is triggered essentially all communication to the forebrain (thinking/logic) gets cut off.
- We are not meant to stay at this level for long periods of time.
Developmental Trauma

Humans need safe, predictable environments and loving caregivers for the brain to develop in a healthy, normal way.

- The brain develops from the bottom up. Development of the upper parts depends upon prior development of lower parts.

- When stress responses are repeatedly activated over an extended period in a young child’s life, sequential development of the brain is disturbed. Foundational steps are missing.

- Developmental trauma can manifest in a variety of potential labels: sensory processing disorder, ADHD, ODD, bipolar, personality disorders, cognitive impairment, speech delay, learning disabilities and more...
Mental health services are often organized around psychiatric diagnostic labels.

For traumatized people, ‘survival behaviors’ are vulnerable to being misunderstood and misdiagnosed.

This leads to interventions targeting the symptoms rather than processing the unresolved trauma.
A shift from traditional language to trauma-informed description of vulnerable individuals can create compassion instead of blame; hope instead of hopelessness, and connection rather than disconnection.

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Attention-Seeking</td>
<td>Attachment-Seeking</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Cautious</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unacceptable Behavior</td>
<td>Understandable Behavior</td>
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<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>Doesn’t Feel Safe Yet</td>
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<tr>
<td>Aggressive</td>
<td>Self-Protecting</td>
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“Nine times out of ten, the story behind the misbehavior won’t make you angry; it will break your heart.”

-Annette Breaux
Anger Iceberg

Icebergs are large pieces of ice found floating in the open ocean. What you can see from the surface can be misleading. Most of the iceberg is hidden below the water.

This is how anger works. Often when we are angry, there are other emotions hidden under the surface.

The Gottman Institute
Trauma-Informed School Support

- **Predictability!** Clearly explain schedules and behavior expectations
  - Words alone may not sink in; add sensory cues. Have signs or a storyboard that shows which activity will happen when, etc.
  - Give advanced notice of fire drills, 4th of July fireworks, Halloween, etc.

- Regularly scheduled breaks - build breaks into the schedule *before* behavior gets out of whack.

- Try not to “punish” behaviors that are trauma-related; develop individual and appropriate responses
A Teacher’s Responsibility

- **Recognize** trauma comes tightly wound in **shame**.

- Do not request or expect students to go into details about their trauma. Avoid assigning projects specifically relating to personal trauma.
  - Students may *choose* to express their trauma, but it should never be *required*.

- **Processing** student trauma is not the job of a teacher; leave that for qualified professionals. Instead, *teach* the **emotional vocabulary** and **creative methods** to express themselves if they so choose.
If A Student Opens Up To You...

Take a strengths-based, asset-driven approach

- Move beyond “what happened to you” to “what’s right with you”
- View those exposed to trauma as agents of change rather than victims
- Focus on the hope and the how
  - What gave you the strength to survive?
  - Who were the people/places/things that made you feel safer?

Be open and listen non-judgmentally

- “What would you do if you or someone had this problem back home?”
- If they say they wouldn’t have these problems back home, ask “Why not?”

Explain available resources and connect them if they are willing.
Newcomers are often unaware of what services exist in America. As such, they typically do not seek out services.

Services need to be introduced and proactively offered.
Secondary Traumatic Stress in Educators

- Coping with the effects of others' trauma can be draining.

- It is not uncommon for educators who deal with traumatized children to develop their own symptoms of traumatic stress. This is known as secondary traumatic stress.

- In a trauma-informed school, staff should be encouraged to practice self-care to guard against or heal from the effects of secondary traumatic stress.
Newcomers: Redefine By Hope

- Resilient and resourceful survivors
- Strong (maybe different) skillsets
- Differing cultures in a community should not be seen as an obstacle to overcome, but rather as inspiration

~ An accent is a sign of bravery ~
THE WORLD IS CHANGED
BY YOUR EXAMPLE, NOT BY
YOUR OPINION.