Build positive, enriching relationships

“The first thing an educator should do in his or her interaction with a student from poverty or one who has been traumatized, is to acknowledge the student’s resiliency. According to Van der Kolk, resiliency comes from the power of the life force, the will to live and to own one’s own life, the energy that counteracts the annihilation of trauma (Body Keeps the Score, 135). The fact that the student shows up in your class means the student has resiliency, or he would not go to school. They are already survivors, with a lot of emotional and physical baggage being carried on their young shoulders. Celebrate that with your students by affirming their strengths, their efforts, and their dreams.”

Reflection: In what subtle or student-specific ways could you affirm your students’ strengths, efforts, and dreams?

Reflection: How could overt or public affirmations backfire? Why is it important to make these affirmations personal and more private?

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Create a safe atmosphere for learning

“Before any other teaching task gets done, one of the most important things a school and a classroom educator can do to address the challenges of teaching students from poverty is to create a safe environment for learning. This safety begins as the students first enter the building. Greet each and every student with a smile and welcoming words at the door as they enter the building. At the school where I teach, our principal has challenged us and organized our morning routines and duties to guarantee every student experiences at least five positive greetings from the time they enter the building until the bell rings for the first period of the day. At first the students try to appear impervious to the greetings, looking down or away. Gradually, they come to welcome the greeting with a face-to-face acknowledgment of the greeting. And if the educator is not quick enough, the student might even greet first before the educator can utter the greeting. As students enter the classroom, greet them by name. As time and opportunity present themselves, ask a question, finding out how each student is doing and something about their interests and who they are. Creating a safe space enriches the students’ emotional safety. Additionally, creating an environment where students feel comfortable making mistakes creates a positive learning environment. Students can learn more from a wrong answer than a correct one because the student could have guessed the correct answer without knowing why that answer is correct. Making a norm of allowing for and learning from mistakes and wrong answers without being made fun of cements the safety students from poverty need to feel in the classroom.”

Reflection: what are techniques you use to help your students feel safe?

Reflection: How do you operationalize the necessity of greeting every student and “getting to work” so instructional time is not lost?

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Give students a sense of control

“Students from poverty come to class with a diminished sense of control in their lives. (Jensen, Engaging, 42) Household resources limit the choices for nutrition and entertainment. They may be awakened in the middle of the night at the end of the month to be loaded up to move out of housing for which there is no money for the next month’s rent. They may share a bed or mattress or a blanket on the floor with any number of other people in the same room. A student’s acting out or withdrawal in the classroom may be a sign of his loss of control and a less than adequate way to attempt to regain control. An alert and caring educator can provide opportunities to return a perception of control to the student in the form of choices on assignments and how they are completed. This may give time and space to regain composure when emotional control has been temporarily lost. Some elementary schools have developed calming corners where there is a box of objects that can serve to calm a student and help him regain composure. The Momentous Institute of Dallas has directions for creating the corner and the objects on their Web site. (www.momentousinstitute.org) Even secondary schools can benefit from objects and places in the classroom that calm a student who constantly lives in the sensations of the past from a life in poverty and from adverse childhood experiences.”

Reflection: This piece talks about calming locations as a structure to establish a sense of control in students. What would you have available at the calming station to guide your students toward that sense of control?

Reflection: How does providing your students true choice in assignments, assessments, and materials lead them to have a greater sense of control?

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Use a calm voice to teach

“An educator can facilitate a safer atmosphere for students from poverty and trauma by teaching and talking in a calm voice. Students from poverty and those who have been traumatized have a noisy, clamoring voice of stressors inside their heads. An educator’s calm voice can soothe those painful sounds and words running through their minds and replace them with words and a tone that can free their bodies from tensing up and locking their brains from learning. In doing so an educator may experience what is known as a change back reaction. All relationships are experienced in a balance like two people balanced on a seesaw. When an educator self-defines by introducing something new to the classroom routine, the educator often receives a change back reaction from the students with a resounding chorus of moans, groans, and “Oh, no!” This reaction is not because one side is right and the other is wrong. Rather, the new ritual or routine is not familiar and, autonomically, the students want the educator to change back to what was familiar. When the educator stands ground calmly and non-reactively, waiting for the change back reaction to subside, the students will have to make a choice and move in the direction of the educator’s new initiative or move further away. The educator has changed the balance on the seesaw, and the students are forced by what is known as family process in family systems theory to regain the homeostatic, balanced relationship with their educator.”

Reflection: when a new initiative hits the doors of your school, how do you react? Understanding how you react can help you empathize with your learners. If you take change in stride, how can you teach those skills to your students via the UDL framework (e.g., you implement the principles and guidelines to teach the skill)?

Reflection: How do you know whether or not you have a calm demeanor or voice?

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
**Teach emotional skills**

“Students from poverty and those who have been traumatized are no different from other students in that all children are born with only six emotions hardwired in the brain. (Jensen, Teaching, 15) The difference is that the other students may have had more attunement from their parent(s) growing up, especially in the first three years of life. They may have parents who actively teach the other emotions humans are capable of experiencing appropriately.”

“The educator might create a bulletin board with the names of the various emotions to be taught. One emotion can be emphasized each week. By the end of the year the students will have been exposed to a wider range of emotional responses. To take the emotional learning a step further, the educator might ask the students to take pictures of each other modeling what those emotions look like on their faces. These photos could be posted on the bulletin board alongside the emotion focused on for the week. Students could be affirmed and rewarded when they express that taught and now caught emotion appropriately.”

*Reflection: What other teaching structures/models do you use to help students learn how to articulate their emotions? Have you checked out the Yale Mood Meter? [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj6AlczyDhg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qj6AlczyDhg)*

*Reflection: How comfortable are you in addressing emotions? What kind of supports do you wish you had? Have you visited CASEL? [https://casel.org/what-is-sel/](https://casel.org/what-is-sel/)*

*Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?*
Working with students who act out

Students who have experienced poverty and trauma often misbehave. Their behavior is a cry for help that gets missed in the moment as tight teaching schedules, interruptions, and emotions come together to create a situation where the student is removed from the classroom and sometimes from the school by way of suspension. If an educator can reframe the misbehavior as a cry for help—a symptom of the stressors from the past that is fueling the student’s emotional response—then, hopefully, discipline does not require the student to leave the classroom. A calming table and chair in the corner of the room may provide a safe place for the student to save face, regain control, and cool down while processing what just happened. The educator, as opportunity allows, can inquire about what is going on with the student. All behavior has a reason that drives it. A student whose stress level is running high may act out to distract from the fact he does not understand the lesson. A flashback may occur that shuts down a student’s speech. At that point, the student can only act with fists or movements because he was not granted permission for what he perceived as an immediate need to be satisfied. Knowing the why of behavior can lead to positive actions to address the behavior instead of a punitive approach that takes the student away from the learning environment. Students from poverty and those who have been traumatized act out because they have experienced a lack of control in their lives due to a lack of resources, emotional support, and understanding. As counterintuitive as it may seem, giving the student more perceived control over her life in the classroom can lessen the misbehavior. Give the student a task or responsibility to fulfill for the teacher or the class. (Jensen, Engaging, 42) Ask her to share one of her strengths as the lesson is taught. Give choices to how she can respond and allow her to save face when she might give a wrong answer or make a mistake. Change the perception of making a mistake or giving a wrong answer to be an opportunity to teach that a person can learn more from a wrong answer than a correct one that was guessed.

Reflection: In-the-moment behaviors described above happen, but what can you design into your environment so student don’t need to act out to communicate their needs?

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Working with withdrawn students

“Educators may encounter a withdrawn student. The student reasons that “If I can appear invisible, I won’t be called on for what I don’t know or haven’t been able to learn. I won’t get embarrassed by a wrong guess at the answer. If I can hide quietly enough in the class, perhaps the teacher won’t see me or the scars and wounds on my body and my face.” While it will take time, the educator of a withdrawn student will need to proceed slowly, continuing to create a safe place to be, a calm voice, and a gentle approach to invite the student to come out of hiding into a classroom that is safe and full of hope. In this approach, the educator may discover significant physical and emotional needs in the student’s life. This may require a referral to the appropriate specialized instructional support personnel (SISP) on the school staff because the educator may not have the time, skill, or resources to address the need in the classroom.”

Reflection: A withdrawn student is different from a shy or introverted student. When students know they have the option to participate in a way that is comfortable to them, they are more likely to continue learning. What options can you provide under engagement and action & expression to support students who are experiencing withdraw?

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Build short-term working memory

The most important cognitive skill that an educator can use to address the stress and neglect from poverty is short-term working memory skills. (Jensen, Engaging, 60-65) The lack of appropriate attunement, self-regulation, and stress contribute to a lack of attention and cause many students from poverty to be treated with powerful drugs for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). In fact, low SES students are medicated with psychotropic drugs at a significantly higher rate than their higher SES counterparts. (Body Keeps the Score, 37) These drugs have significant side effects—including sleepiness—and have to be regulated often when families from poverty have limited time and resources to provide ongoing follow up treatment. Some students stop taking the medication because of the side effects or the family does not have the means to keep the prescription filled. Attentional skills can be built by practicing short-term working memory skills. In as little as a week with daily practice a few minutes a day, the growth actually shows up on brain scans. This can be done with number sequences and with words making sentences and telling a story. In working with numbers sequences, give students a set of numbers such as from 1-20. Have someone begin by naming one of those numbers. A second person repeats the number called out by the first person, then adds his own number, which cannot be a consecutive number. The third person repeats the numbers in sequence from the first two, then adds her own. This goes on around the room until either the process is successfully completed or breaks down. If it breaks down, do not emphasize that someone got it wrong. Rather focus on how far the group got. Celebrate and start over again and see if the group can go further the next time. The process with words is similar. The first person begins with a word and the second person adds a word to begin to create a thought in a sentence. As each person participates by repeating the previous words in the order they were spoken, then adds his own, a story begins to emerge. This process not only develops working memory, but also creates anticipation regarding where the story will go and planning for what the next student will add to the story.

Reflection: What supports can you put in place to support your students’ short-term learning needs? Think about short term reminders related to materials, the topic, short-term goals, the lesson goal, and long-term goals.

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Expressive writing

The next strategy a teacher can use with all students—especially those from poverty and with trauma in their lives—I call: Write, write, write! Researchers asked a group of people to write about their trauma for 15 minutes for four consecutive days. The ones who wrote about the facts and emotions of the trauma reported fewer health problems in the months following the test. A similar study by Pennebaker (Expressive Writing) and his research assistants also demonstrated an increase in health when a person was allowed to express the emotions from trauma, either in writing or spoken words. (The Body Keeps the Score, 239-40) Find ways to incorporate this type of expressive writing across the curriculum. In turn, the captive feelings from poverty and trauma can be released in as little as four days. The invisible barriers to learning will begin to disappear at the same time.

Reflection: You might not feel immediately comfortable asking students to write about their trauma, but you can provide them with inspiring examples of writing done by other students.

https://themighty.com/2016/04/autistic-boy-writes-poem-called-i-am/ (what kind of trauma has this child experienced? Does this shift how you define trauma?)

The International Literacy Association has specific information about supporting students when writing about trauma:
https://www.literacyworldwide.org/blog/literacy-daily/2018/05/01/releasing-childhood-trauma-through-writing

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Teach reading skills

A child is not born with the ability to read. Reading must be taught. (Jensen, Teaching, 37) The skills that come together to develop reading skills can be shared at an early age by caregivers reading to a child and allowing the child to read on his own. Parents from poverty sometimes can’t read themselves or have scant time or resources to read or buy books. (Jensen, Teaching, 37) The parts of the brain involved in reading develop over a long period in gestation and are therefore susceptible to problems and concerns. That is why some children from poverty have difficulty reading due to poor nutrition, poor prenatal habits, and limited health care resources. Providing reading classes and involving students in reading across the curriculum will assist in alleviating this symptom from poverty and trauma. Once the student gets involved in words and stories, the world horizon begins to enlarge and the limiting stressors from the past events come into perspective as indeed belonging in the past. Then the stressors begin to relinquish their hold on these students. Reading is important across the curriculum and will enhance the socioemotional development of the children at the same time. For a student from poverty or one who has known trauma, reading will also expand her horizons as it makes the curriculum accessible to the student through books. Through reading, students can try on another’s experiences, freeing them—at least momentarily—from the constant sensations of pain from trauma and poverty. (Jensen, Teaching, 370)

Reflection: Teaching students to read isn’t just the job of the reading teacher. It’s a skill that’s needed across all academic environments. How do you support learners in your environment who struggle with reading?

Reflection: Adolescent Literacy suggests seven strategies that support quality reading. How might you help your older learners acquire one of these strategies? [http://www.adlit.org/article/19844/](http://www.adlit.org/article/19844/)

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
**Build students’ vocabulary**

Building a student’s vocabulary builds brain structure quickly, and that growth shows up on brain scans. Instead of a word wall being an afterthought or secondary to the lesson plan, incorporate vocabulary building in your lesson plans. Adding words to a student who has been traumatized not only increases their ability to speak with a wider range of words, increasing vocabulary builds new structure in the brain for learning. (Jensen, Engaging, 11-22) Using a journal, have students track in a journal a list of the new words they learn. Ring a bell or celebrate as a class when a student uses a new vocabulary word correctly in class. Serve a vocabulary sheet cake at the end of a unit of study with new words written in icing on the cake. Create a wordsmith badge that students can wear to demonstrate increased mastery. Vocabulary building not only strengthens the structure of the brain of a traumatized student from poverty, it also adds words that may access and give a voice to the feelings and stressors that have been driving their behavior.

*Reflection: In what ways do you celebrate the use of new vocabulary in your environment?*

*Reflection: How do you support and celebrate culturally-linked vocabulary that is associated with your lesson/unit? How do you identify it? How might you shift that role to your learners?*

*Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?*
Teach self-regulation

It is important to teach students from poverty how to self-regulate their emotions and their behaviors. Many students whose lives have been impacted by poverty or trauma lack quality attunement time and social skills from the first three years of life. In that vacuum of neglect, they have learned little empathy. The educator can begin to teach students self-regulation by teaching in a calm voice so that the stressors from poverty and trauma do not get excited. The same calming techniques recommended earlier to address educators’ stress can be taught to students as well. If the educator is skilled in yoga, that can be a way to begin. If the educator has no yoga training, the students can be led in breathing exercises. If students balk at the breathing exercises, have them blow soap bubbles. The breathing process in blowing bubbles is a slow breathing out which accomplishes the same goal—relaxation. Mindfulness is the current buzzword for meditation. (See Mindfulness for skills and strategies to use with students in the classroom) Rituals can be established for the beginning of class or when stressors seem to arise and get in the way of learning. Taking a moment to reflect and attempt to feel and name the sensations a student is experiencing is at the heart of healing trauma. The more a student comes into awareness of current sensations, the feelings from the past that have ruled the present moments since the trauma occurred begin to fade into the past. According to Van der Kolk, this is where trauma begins to heal, more so than with talk therapy and medications. (Body Keeps the Score, 62-63, 96) The use of relaxation techniques is critical in managing trauma and neglect in schools. (Body Keeps the Score, 207-210) Students may also need to be taught manners, anger management, taking turns, and the emotions that the body is not hardwired with at birth. Instead of fussing and raising her voice, the educator can use occasions when students demonstrate what they were not taught growing up as teachable moments. Yes, this takes some extra time, but it pays off in the long run.

Reflection: UDL has an entire guideline dedicated to this concept! When you look at that guideline, what are other ways you suggest supporting students to gain this skill?

Reflection: Use earbuds, find a seat, and go to the following video. Do the breathing practice for at least 2 minutes. Share with a partner your experience. How do you think your experience affects your learners?

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aXItOY0sLRY

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Teach empathy

Because many students from poverty and those who have experienced a variety of adverse childhood experiences have often had little to no attunement in the first three years of life, they need to be taught empathy. (See Born for Love for the research and strategies for teaching and modeling empathy) It is never too late to learn empathy. The students’ mirror neurons are still picking up the clues to what life is about from their teacher as he or she models appropriate behavior. As you teach and interact with these students look them in the eyes as you talk. Provide opportunities for students to move around the room as they learn. The brain moves knowledge that is being learned to long-term memory potentiation as the student learns and moves at the same time.

Reflection: Our brains are “wired” to be social. It is within our design, but experiences are what help us develop more permanent neural connections. What do you offer in your environment to help your learners gain more empathy for others?

Reflection: The Harvard Graduate School of Education offers 5 essential steps schools can take to build empathy. From this list, what do you offer? What do you need to build in? https://mcc.gse.harvard.edu/resources-for-educators/how-build-empathy-strengthen-school-community

Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
Teaching hope

Martin Seligman pioneered understanding of what has come to be known as learned helplessness. (See Seligman’s classic works, Learned Helplessness, Learned Optimism, and The Optimistic Child.) This mindset is rampant in schools with students from poverty and where students have been repeatedly traumatized. After experiencing years of disappointments, neglect, and abuse from those who were supposed to be caregivers, children may learn to be helpless. They withdraw in class. They do not make the effort to do their work because they believe nothing will come from it; or with low self-esteem, they do not believe they can learn. Eventually, students give up. When students say they are bored, they may be expressing their anger at feeling helpless, having been disappointed too many times. When the student says he or she does not care, the student is telling the teacher, “I have no hope.” An educator can counter this expression of apathy by modeling hope and by not giving up on the student. This can come in the form of asking the student to say more about her boredom or apathy. Ask her, “When did you first become aware of this feeling?”

Reflection: Hope is often connected with positive consistency (i.e., when positive structures, reactions, and greetings are consistent). What do you have in your environment that leads to hope for your learners?

Reflection: Intervention Central lists 10 quick classroom strategies to counteract learned helplessness. Read through them and discuss which you have woven into your environment and which you could add.


Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?
**Listening to the students’ stories**

Listening is one of the most powerful skills an educator can have. Every student in every class is yearning to be heard and to be known, especially the ones from low SES families and those who have been traumatized because they were not seen and heard growing up. Begin by listening for the modality in which the student learns—visual, auditory, or kinesthetic. As previously noted, the challenge then is for the educator to be able to teach outside her comfort zone in order to teach to the preferred modality of the student.

*Reflection: How do you demonstrate strong listening skills to your learners? How do ask them to model them to you?*

*Reflection: Many lists across the internet tell teachers to have students look them in the eyes to demonstrate that they are listening. This directive ignores cultural implications. What are those implications and how does UDL help you design a more equitably designed listening environment?*

*Find the connection: What guideline(s) would help you design this kind of environment?*