

SPIRITUALITY IN TRAUMA- INFORMED EDUCATION – A CASE STUDY

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TRAUMA AND LEARNING

- *Repeated traumatic experiences lead to an over-reactive stress system. Traumatized people are living in a constant state of emergency.*
- *People who have experienced trauma may find it more challenging than their peers to pay attention and process new information*
- *The question we should ask is not “What’s wrong with you?” but rather “What happened to you?”*

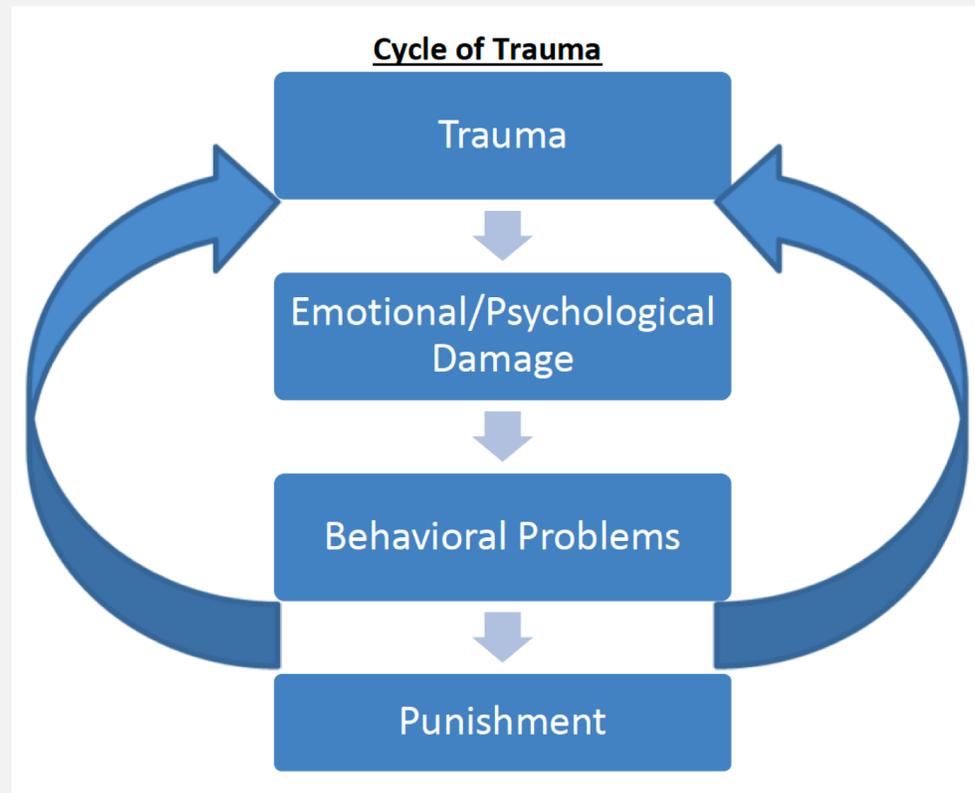
TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION

- A trauma-informed perspective recognizes that people who have been chronically abused or neglected may have many possible triggers. These triggers often include situations where clients experience a lack of respect and safety and an absence of control and choice – experiences that often mimic and resonate with past traumatic experiences (Haskell, 2012, pp.9-10).

NEGATIVE LEARNER IDENTITY

- Traumatized adult learners may find it difficult to maintain self-esteem in a new learning environment, may feel overwhelmed, inept or helpless, and become angry. They may have a negative learner identity, where ‘the classroom triggers memories of failure and shame that might have once driven them from school’ (Cozolino & Sprokay, 2006).

BREAKING THE CYCLE OF TRAUMA



CONTEXT

- Vancouver BC Downtown Eastside
- Weekly low-barrier life skills program (conflict resolution training, non-violent communication etc.)
- Program enriched with elements of (Christian) spirituality:
Opening with: worship songs, short meditations, short liturgical readings. Closing with common prayer.

METHOD

- Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
- Semi-structured interviews
- Participants' personal school biography and experience of the trauma-informed program
- Spirituality not an explicit focus of this study

PARTICIPANTS

- 6 participants who had experienced severe sexual and / or physical trauma in their childhood
- Interviews after 6 months to 1 year of program participation

FINDINGS

- Meta-themes of the study:
- We are all smart
- Social support is key
- A safe learning community
- **Spirituality helps to create a safe learning community**

ACCEPTANCE

- At home I knew what kind of abuse to expect whereas at school it could have been anything....There was always this anxiety and fear around my classmates and you know, I had no friends....
- **[Praying with others] makes me feel very accepted.** Because you know, that is kind of the point of this program, is to accept everybody. If I was not accepted, I would not be here. And it makes it *that* much easier to learn. You can focus. (Kurt)

RELATIONSHIP

- Just the people. **The singing.** The relationship building. Just the sense of family and belonging. And we always seem to have a really good time. (Matt)
- I love coming here because there are a lot of people I can love....I see a lot of people coming here when they are having problems. And I think that is good, that they trust [the staff] enough to come here and say 'this is what I need'. **And that the staff can pray with us.** There is definitely a sense of community in regards to mutual respect and there is definitely an attempt to connect and build friendship with each other, so there is a more personal kind of relating that you don't see in other settings. (Nicole)

VULNERABILITY

- I mean I know that for one, it's a safe place. **It's a place where I can express my worries in prayer.** It's a place where my opinion is allowed....and I think that's what allows people to learn much better....In order for me to ask a question, I have to show part of myself. And in order to receive an answer, you have to show a part of yourself. And it brings together a community. (Kurt)

TRUST

- You don't know what's going on behind those doors. Once those gates close, all hell breaks loose....We were like lambs going to the slaughterhouse, that's how I felt....
- (The program staff are] **like shepherds and they are watching over their lost sheep.** (Elsa)

CONCLUSIONS

- Spirituality can be an important factor in trauma-informed education. Praying and singing together as well as meditative and liturgical practices have the potential to enhance mutual acceptance, relationships, vulnerability and trust. These elements are key to create a **safe learning community**, which is the most important factor for traumatized learners.