NATIONAL EDUCATION ASSOCIATION
nea.org

BACKGROUNDER:

EDUCATING STUDENTS FROM POVERTY AND TRAUMA

Poverty and trauma impact student brain development, health, and behavior. The stressors of poverty (lack of nutritious food, unstable housing, etc.) and traumatic events can put students in a "fight" or "flight" mode. Operating from such places prevents students from accessing higher-order thinking and negatively impacts learning and achievement. The hyper-awareness, developed as an adaptation to their stressful environments, produces stress hormones that have the potential to harm students' physical health and cognitive development. As a result, students from poverty and trauma may be prone to sickness and have difficulties regulating behavior, and accessing parts of the brain critical to language, memory, and learning.

Below are some strategies educators could employ when working with students from poverty and trauma.

1. **Celebrate assets**—Educators should acknowledge their students' resilience. The fact that students from poverty and trauma show up in class means they are resilient, or they would not go to school. They are already survivors, carrying a lot of emotional and physical baggage on their young shoulders. Celebrate your students' resilience by affirming their strengths, their efforts, and their dreams.

2. **Create a safe atmosphere for learning**– At the start of the day, greet each student by name and with a smile and welcoming words. As time permits, ask a question, find out how each student is doing and something about their interests and who they are. During instruction, create an environment where students feel comfortable making mistakes. 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. If a student gives a wrong answer or makes a mistake, give options for how she can respond, and allow her to save face. Change the perception of making a mistake or giving a wrong answer to be an opportunity to teach that you can learn more from a wrong answer than a correct one that was guessed.

3. **Give students a sense of control**—Students from poverty come to class with a diminished sense of control in their lives. 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 it. An alert and caring educator can provide opportunities to return a student's sense of control by offering choices on assignments and how they are completed. If a student acts out, give time and space to regain composure. Some elementary schools have developed calming corners with a box of objects that can calm a student and help him regain composure. Giving the student more perceived control over his life in the classroom can lessen the misbehavior.

NEA Education Policy and Practice Department
Center for Great Public Schools 1201 16th St., NW, Washington, D.C. 20036

18413.7/15.vn

4. **Teach emotional skills**—In some ways, students from poverty and those who have been traumatized are no different from other students. All children are born with only six emotions hardwired in the brain. The difference is that the other students may have had more attunement from their parent(s) growing up and been actively taught other emotions. Attunement is the result of a secure attachment to a responsive caregiver; proper attunement promotes the development of self-awareness, empathy, impulse control, and self-motivation. Gratitude is an important emotion to teach all students. If a student does not respond with gratitude for something an educator has done for her, it may be because she has not been taught gratitude. Use the moment to teach, perhaps for the first time, that important emotion and attitude.

5. **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. At times, 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. By reframing 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 will 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.

6. **Build short-term working memory**—The lack of appropriate attunement, self-regulation, and stress create difficulties in focusing. Attentional skills can be built by practicing short-term working memory skills. With daily practice a few minutes a day, in as little as a week the growth actually shows up on brain scans. This can be done with number sequences and word games. In working with numbers sequences, give students a set of numbers such as from 1-20. Have one student begin by naming one of those numbers. A second student repeats the first number called out, then adds his own number, which cannot be a consecutive number. The third student 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.

7. **Expressive writing**—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. 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 few as four days. The invisible barriers to learning will begin to disappear at the same time.

8. **Teach reading skills**—Children from poverty often have difficulty reading due to problems experienced while in gestation and or growing up in an environment with limited interactive reading. Providing reading classes and involving students in reading across the curriculum will help alleviate this symptom from poverty and trauma. Reading will also expand students' horizons as it makes the curriculum more accessible. Through reading, students can try on someone else's experiences, freeing them—at least momentarily—from the constant sensations of pain from trauma and poverty.

9. **Build students' vocabulary**—Instead of a word wall being an afterthought or secondary to the lesson plan, incorporate vocabulary building in your lesson plans. Building vocabulary not only increases students' ability to speak with a wider range of words, but also gives voice to the feelings that have been driving their behavior and builds new structures in the brain. Using a journal, have students make 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.

10. **Teach self-regulation**—It is important to teach students from poverty how to self-regulate their emotions and their behaviors. First, the educator can begin to teach students self-regulation by speaking in a calm voice to avoid exciting the stressors from poverty and trauma. Second, give a yoga lesson. If the educator has no yoga training, the students can be led in a breathing exercise. 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 and movement breaks are other popular techniques. Mindfulness is a stress-reduction technique used to quiet the mind and help to regulate behav¬ior. Taking a moment to reflect and attempt to feel and name the sensations a student is experiencing is at the heart of healing trauma. Physical exercise mitigates the impact stress hormones have on the brain and has been proven to increase cognition, memory, self-control, and reduce the likelihood of depression.

11. **Teaching hope**—After experiencing years of disappointments, 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 doesn't care, he 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.

12. **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 those from poverty 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—and offer instruction in the preferred modality. An educator may need to employ multiple modalities such as verbal, written, and visual instructions.

For more information and strategies on how to build educator resilience and capacity in engaging students from poverty, please refer to NEA's handbook, *Teaching Children from Poverty and Trauma*. To download this handbook, go to: https://www.nea.org/assets/docs/20200_Poverty%20Handbook_flat.pdf.