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Forum: Supporting Mental Health

(Part 3 of 3)

Creating a Multiculturally Responsive and Trauma-Informed Classroom Ecology for Diverse Learners: Collaboration, Classroom Community, and Identification of Systemic Barriers

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The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization's (UNESCO, 2022) *Fifth Global Report on Adult Learning and Education* (GRALE) highlights that vulnerable groups such as rural populations, migrants, prisoners, people with disabilities, and indigenous peoples are among those who would benefit from adult basic education. Hence, in the United States, learners attending federally funded adult education programs reflect diverse communities. In 2020 and 2021, 44% of adult learners identified as Hispanic/Latinx, 19% as Black/African American, 8% as Asian/Asian American, and 1% as American Indian or Alaska Native (National Reporting System for Adult Education [NRSA], 2021). Among this cohort of 2020-2021 adult learners, most were English language learners with low-literacy and/or cultural barriers. Almost 25% were economically challenged (NRSA, 2021). Trauma amongst these learners is also prevalent, with 44% of those participating in an adult basic education program reporting trauma (Miller-Roenigk et al., 2021). It is thus imperative for educators of adult learners to employ a multicultural approach that also accounts for traumas experienced by underserved populations due to racism, historical violence, discrimination, and immigration, among other experiences (Tummala-Narra, 2007).

Trauma-informed principles are inseparable from culture, as cultural groups share traumatic experiences that can become multigenerational and culturally defined (Tummala-Narra 2007). Hence, how people experience and respond to trauma may be influenced by and dependent upon culture. For example, a response to trauma may reflect a cultural response to somatization of traumatic stress alongside living in a collective culture where the group is valued over the individual. Thus, an *ataque de nervios* that resembles a panic attack – and is a short lived, intense stress reaction that may include wailing, rocking, crying, and arm movements –reflects a culturally influenced expression of trauma (American Psychiatric Association, 2013).

Correspondingly, resilience in response to trauma may utilize cultural beliefs and values

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that can be based on culture-specific traumatic experiences, as well as interconnections among oneself, community, and environment (Clauss-Ehlers, 2008; Tummala-Narra, 2007). *Culturally focused resilient adaptation* involves a process whereby individuals "[negotiate] stress through a combination of character traits, cultural background, cultural values, and facilitating factors in the sociocultural environment" (Clauss-Ehlers, 2004, p. 36). This article explores how educators of adult basic education might enhance sensitivity to trauma and resilience from a multicultural perspective through the implementation of teaching and learning strategies that reflect an understanding of how culture and trauma intersect in the classroom.

Theoretical Framework

A multicultural approach locates identity, context, and intersectionality within broader systems including "age, generation, culture, language, gender, race, ethnicity, ability status, sexual orientation, gender identity, socioeconomic status, religion, spirituality, immigration status, education, and employment, among other variables" (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019, p. 233). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's (SAMHSA, 2014) *Trauma Informed Approach* presents a framework with six components of trauma-informed care across settings including: "safety; trustworthiness and transparency; peer support; collaboration and mutuality; empowerment, voice, and choice; and cultural, historical and gender issues" (p. 10). This sixth part includes practices that respond to individuals' multicultural experiences and considers historical traumas (SAMHSA, 2014). A multicultural approach to the adult learner classroom builds upon SAMHSA's (2014) foundation by emphasizing how an overall trauma-informed model is situated within the intersectional contexts of individual experience(s).

The ecological model provides an outline for multicultural trauma-informed practice as it locates the individual in an assortment of interacting structures, one being the idea that an individual's response to trauma is situated in cultural values, traditions, and beliefs (Tummala-Narra, 2007). For instance, trauma-informed youth education models have described how educators can support students across these contexts (Crosby, 2015). The American Psychological Association's 2017 Multicultural Guidelines adapted Bronfenbrenner's ecological model set up "a layered-ecological model" that "comprises dynamic, nested systems that transact over time" (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019, p. 233). The model's five levels are: "bidirectional model of self-definition and relationships"; "community, school, and family context"; "institutional impact on engagement"; "domestic and international climate"; "and outcomes" (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019, pp. 233-234).

This article considers the application of the layered ecological model within an adult learner classroom. Practical approaches encourage both adult learner educators and adult learners to incorporate multiculturally responsive trauma informed practice in domains of self-definition and relationships, classroom environment and interactions, and responsiveness to systemic influences (Figure 1).

Practical Approaches

Self-definition and Relationships

Self-concept forms in part due to experiences of thoughts and feelings, interpersonal relationships, and within the broader environment (Clauss-

Ehlers et al., 2019). Consequently, identity influences actions and feelings, including classroom behaviors. Identity is constantly evolving, intersecting, and can be shaped by culture, trauma, and ongoing experiences of discrimination, racism, and bias (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019; Tummala-Narra, 2014). A response to trauma may be influenced by cultural context, understanding, perspective of the trauma, and cultural norms associated with help-seeking behaviors. Resulting thoughts, feelings, and decisions in response to trauma in a cultural context may influence how adult learners define their self-concept (Tummala-Narra, 2014). As a result of trauma, for instance, adult learners may exhibit difficulties with risk-taking in the classroom (e.g., participation) that lead to decreased self-esteem, feelings of powerlessness, and a lack of classroom engagement (Perry, 2006).

Educators can use learner-centered strategies to support diverse adult learners, involving a commitment to: (a) awareness of one's understanding of trauma and challenging assumptions about expectations for trauma reactions; (b) invest time to learn about culturally-related traumas, histories, and experiences, and how these may have an impact on the learner's self-concept and behaviors; and (c) consideration of language use in the classroom, such that it affirms the intersectional identities of adult learners and avoids re-traumatization through bias or discrimination. For instance, word choice may be experienced as a trauma trigger, so it is important to become aware of one's own explicit and implicit biases (Sherwood et al., 2008). Overall, such approaches encourage educators of adult learners to center the learner's identity in the classroom space (e.g., Level 1 of the layered-ecological model). This, in turn, is hoped to enhance the potential for a positive classroom experience (Skiba, 2020).

The Classroom Context

Factors such as interactions with teachers, staff, peers, and the classroom environment are instrumental in maximizing a learner's potential (Crosby, 2015). Educators can create a collaborative learning environment where they are able to engage with the learner's identity, and experience (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019). Adult learning principles emphasize the importance of self-direction, such that the learner takes responsibility for their learning and participates in goal setting and the decision-making process (Collins, 2004). Utilizing these principles in a diverse classroom creates an environment where the learner is empowered, culture is respected, and the impact of trauma is recognized. Educators are encouraged to consider how both educational practices and course content can reflect the experiences of their learners. Through multiculturally-responsive teaching strategies, a goal is for learners to see themselves reflected in the learning environment, a factor that may enhance ownership and engagement, and thus motivation.

Educators can foster a co-created classroom community by involving learners in the curriculum development process and seeking their input. Educators can also tune in to learner curricular needs (both prior to the start of class and ongoing) through surveys that ask about what they find most and least helpful in facilitating their learning. Such co-collaboration seeks to empower learners, who may have low self-esteem due to experiences of feeling ignored, invisible, and/or powerless.

The classroom environment is also informed by positive interactions and relationships. Experiencing a sense of classroom community enhances engagement and motivation in learning (Collins, 2004). Individuals who have experienced trauma, including immigrants who may have

experienced trauma in their migration journeys, may benefit from connecting with others, as both immigration and traumatic events can lead to feelings of alienation and a loss of support systems (Tummala-Narra, 2007). Resilience can also be facilitated by having a sense of community support (Clauss-Ehlers, 2004; Tummala-Narra, 2007).

Classroom collaboration and community can be further established through a strategy where educators provide opportunities for learners to form peer groups to support each other (Cherrstrom et al., 2017). Participating in group projects or utilizing a cohort or peer mentoring system are strategies that promote peer support in the classroom context. Research on a community-based adult literacy program found that positive relationships among learners enhanced in-classroom learning and created personal support systems (Terry, 2006). Thus, peer support groups and related activities can create community in the classroom itself and help build resilience by re-establishing trust and connection, which may be disrupted after trauma.

Systemic Impact

Educators of adult learners are encouraged to be aware of the impact of systemic influences (e.g., structural oppression) on adult learner experiences (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019). For instance, trauma is linked to reduced work functioning and increased absenteeism in adulthood, as mediated by depression and anxiety (De Venter et al., 2020). This is important considering adult learners may have difficulty attending class. Barriers to engagement may also stem from fears of governmental persecution or a mistrust of government services, as some may have experiences of oppression by governments in their countries of origin (Clauss-Ehlers, 2019). Other barriers may include working long hours and not having childcare and/or transportation. Educators can help mitigate the impact of systemic factors on attendance and engagement by asking for learner input about convenient times to offer classes. Correspondingly, program staff can explore ways to organize transportation or childcare on site.

Those who experienced trauma may also struggle with anxiety, depression, and substance use (Merrick et al., 2017). Due to systemic or cultural barriers, learners may have difficulty accessing mental health services. Barriers to access and utilization of mental health services may include language differences (e.g., finding a provider that speaks one's language), stigma, and/or views of mental illness and its treatment that differ from the dominant Western-based narrative (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019). Immigrant communities also often lack access to culturally sensitive mental health services that approach treatment from a sociocultural sensitive framework (Tummala-Narra, 2014). Race-based trauma may also lead to a mistrust of services, as historically people of color are misdiagnosed more frequently (Tummala-Narra, 2007). Educators can collaborate with community organizations to identify services to refer learners as needed. They can consider how referrals may be culturally appropriate and understand that stigma may have an impact on help seeking. Educators can partner with community stakeholders to advocate for culture-centered services that reflect adult learner needs (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019).

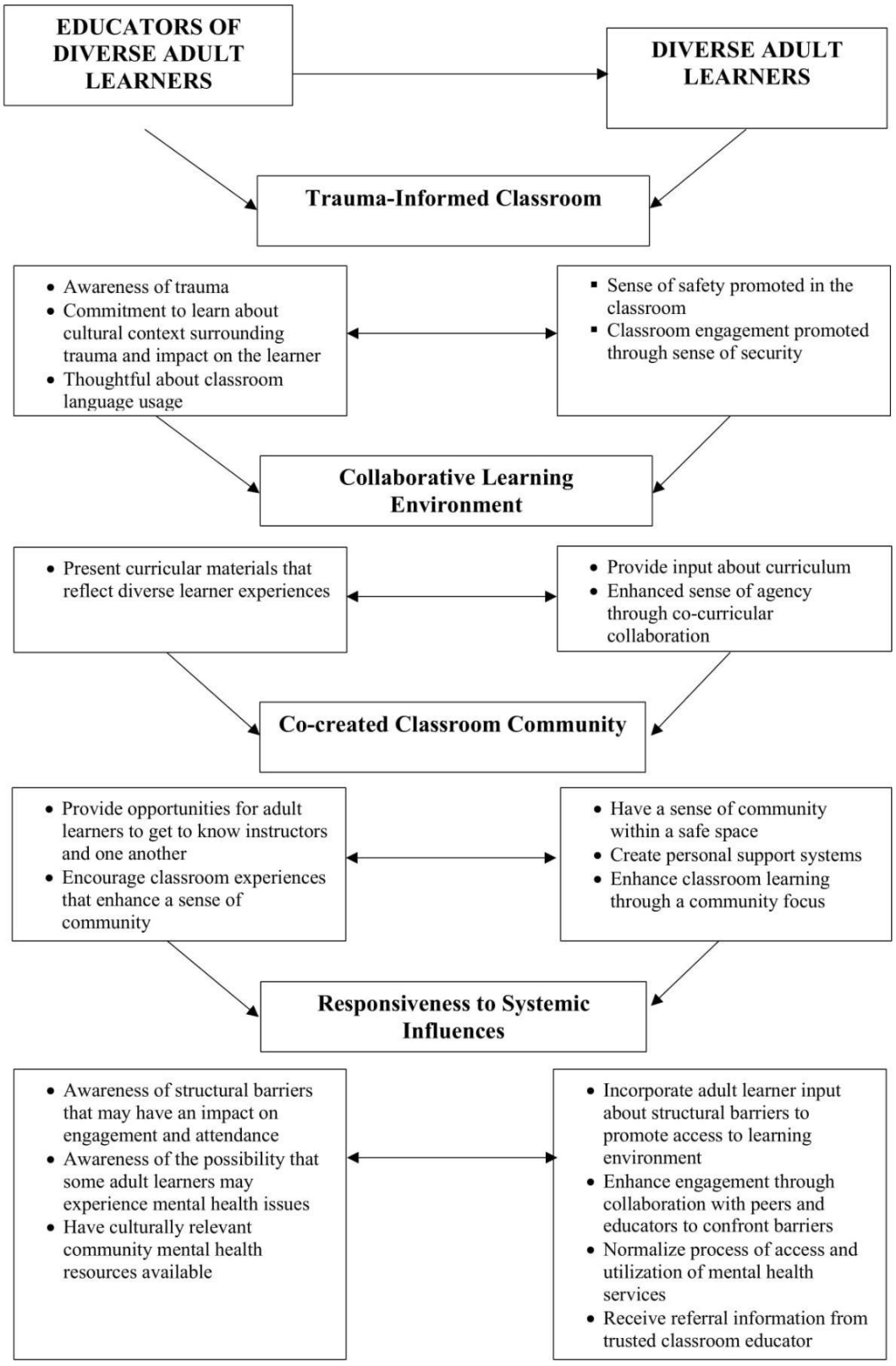
Conclusion

This article presents strategies educators of adult learners can implement to create a trauma-informed classroom ecology that is sensitive to a diverse community of adult learners. Through a "bi-directional model of self-definition and

relationships" (Clauss-Ehlers et al., 2019, p. 233) educators can collaborate to provide a classroom community that seeks to be responsive to the needs of a multicultural adult learner classroom setting. With the creation of a trauma-informed classroom, educators and adult learners can engage in strategies that promote a collaborative learning environment, co-created classroom community, and are responsive to systemic influences (Figure 1). A multiculturally-responsive and trauma-informed approach seeks to address the specific needs of diverse classroom settings. In turn, it is hoped that this approach can enhance participation among diverse populations in a context of a collaborative classroom environment.

Additional research is needed to further understand how trauma and culture intersect in the adult basic education classroom. Given limited research, empirically informed best practices require refinement to address the impact of COVID-19 on adult learners and the educational systems in which they are enrolled. A collaborative participatory action research approach is suggested so that knowledge generation and future pedagogical approaches correspond with the experiences of diverse adult learners (Baum et al., 2006).

FIGURE 1: Creating a Multiculturally Responsive and Trauma-Informed Classroom Ecology for Diverse Adult Learners



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