

**Western Cape Teacher Development CoP**

**Highlights of Meeting**

**Becoming a Trauma Informed Teacher**

**10 March 2020**

**LEAP Science and Maths School Central Office**



**Setting the scene**

This year's theme for the Teacher Development CoP is Teacher Wellness. Our first Teacher Development CoP looked at becoming a Trauma Informed teacher, with particular focus on how teachers can become trauma informed and teacher wellbeing. The CoP meeting took place at LEAP Central Office in Cape Town and was attended by educators, school management and the NGO sector.



**Overview of presentation by Judy Strickland.**

Judy Strickland Director and founder of Hope House Counselling Centre provided a presentation. The CoP meeting took the form of an interactive workshop where Judy looked at definitions of trauma and what constitutes trauma behaviour. Judy defined Trauma and trauma behaviour, unpacking the obvious and many underlying behaviours in traumatised learners. She then went on to discuss teacher self-care and wellbeing practices. The presentation ended off by demonstrating tool and techniques to create calmer classrooms. There were activities done with the CoP members that resulted in discussions around dealing with trauma in the classrooms, specifically how to navigate the Life Orientation curriculum as it may have trauma triggers for learners.

**Defining Trauma and Trauma Behaviour**

After engaging members to share what Trauma means to them Judy explained that Trauma is not only in the big moments such as a car accident etc, it is the little things that impact the individual. An illness or living with the parent living with an illness, bullying, living with a bi polar family member, gang activities, witnessing shooting or police activity and being isolated in a family are all very traumatic for children and very often leads to traumatic behaviour.

Judy explained three different types of trauma that can occur:

1. Acute Trauma- this is a once off incident such as a car accident.
2. Complex trauma- this occurs as a result of the acute trauma. Continuing with the car accident analogy- if a parent dies in the car accident and the child has to move homes, schools and is traumatised by this disruption.
3. Chronic Trauma- The worst type of trauma where the child does not see an end to.

### **Trauma Behaviour in children**

Prompted by Judy to note disruptive behaviours in the classroom, CoP members shared that behaviours such as physical and emotional bullying, lying, being despondent or distracted were some of the behaviours that really frustrated them and even angered them in the classroom. In the feedback, Judy shared that many of the behaviours that educators noted were actually underlying trauma behaviours. Studies have also shown that trauma can be passed down from generation to generation as it changes your DNA. Individuals who experience trauma have children whose brains are wired for trauma. We often refer to these children as being 'hot-wired'. According to Judy, generational trauma can end through Trauma counselling, to teach children how to regulate their feelings of anger, aggression, depression etc. but if this healing does not take place, we could find ourselves with a generation that is more violent than the current generation.

### **What does Trauma do to the Brain of a Child?**

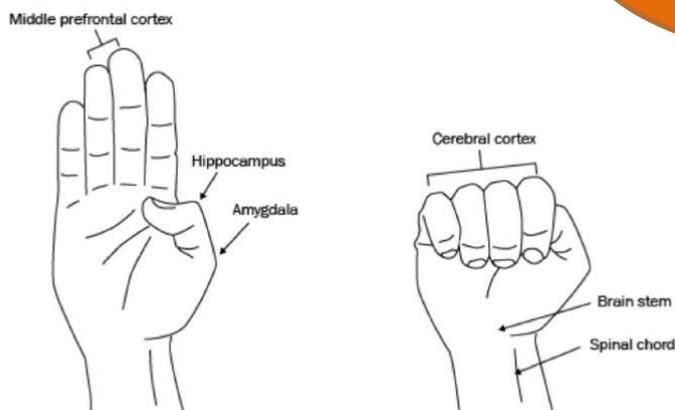
Judy used Dr Dan Siegel's Hand Brain Model to demonstrate the various parts of the brain and what happens when a child experience a negative emotion as a result of trauma.

In this model, the wrist represents the spinal cord rising from the backbone and supporting the brain. The inner brain stem is represented by your palm. The thumb represents the limbic system and you can simulate its approximate position when you rest your thumb across your palm. Curling your fingers back over the top creates the cortex in its place.

In the wake of a trauma, a child's cortex is disconnected, or the fingers of the "hand brain" are flipped up. The emotional parts of the brain are running the show and higher-level thinking is not part of a child's response. Living in a fear-activated state of hyper-awareness causes a child to be quick to anger. In their subconscious efforts to self-protect, a child might be viewed as defiant,

disrespectful or overly aggressive. Other children may appear to be zoning out or drifting off following a traumatic event. These children are seen as shutting down, but their brain is telling them, 'you need to be safe.' This has come to be called "flipping your lid." When a child is in this elevated state, using language may not be an effective tool to help them calm down and self-regulate. It is therefore understandable that a child that is traumatised is not receptive to learning.

Trauma is defined by the way an individual reacts to an event, rather than the event itself.



Hand model courtesy of Dan Siegel

'Trauma changes the make-up of the brain

### Tools and Techniques to creating calmer classroom

**As part of their Trauma Informed Training, Hope House Counselling provides educators with calming tools to help learners regulate their feelings.**

Part of the Trauma Informed Training conducted by Hope House counselling equips teachers to begin the process of healing and gives them the tools that engages the brain to create a safe classroom conducive to learning. Tools that help learners regulate emotions include:

- Create a calm corner- this is a space in the classroom with the desk facing the wall and having tools available to fiddle with that creates a rhythmic movement with your hands.
- Instead of sending the child out of the classroom have them spend time in the calm corner.

- Playing with a rubrics cube for older learners.
- Anything that takes their minds of what they are feeling and gets them focused on something else.
- Deep breathing exercises engage their brains by doing deep breathing exercises.
- Get children to march on the spot, pat on their laps or do firm presses with their hands on a desk or wall to get rid of excess adrenaline.
- Give the child something heavy to carry e.g. weighted blanket.



*1 An example of a Calm Zone that can be replicated in the classroom*

## **Teacher Self Care**

Judy discussed the importance of selfcare as a teacher and highlighted that teachers cannot assist children with their healing if they themselves are not cared for. Below are some of the standout points from this discussion:

- Many teachers have intergenerational trauma, trauma from witnessing violence and even just working with children who has experienced trauma is traumatizing for teachers. It is therefore essential that for teacher to take responsibility for caring for themselves.
- Teacher burnout is very common. Signs that indicate one is heading for burnout include; exhaustion, headaches, insomnia, a weakened immune system with susceptibility to illness, stomach issues, using alcohol and pain pills excessively, not returning phone calls, avoiding colleagues, experiencing a lack of empathy and resenting the demands made on you.

### *Avoiding Teacher Burnout*

Judy offered some advice to teachers on how to look after one's mental health to avoid burnout. This includes;

- **Schedule regular 2-5-minute breaks throughout the day.**
- Make a concerted effort to switch off during term breaks.
- Take the time to find out what helps you unwind, a hobby, exercise, reading etc.
- Start a Journal- noting three things at the end of every day that you are grateful for, this will help you to focus on the reality and creates mindfulness when you are feeling overwhelmed.
- As school leaders we need to create a school that everyone wants to be part of. We need to let our staff feel valued.



### Discussion: Question and Answers

#### Is bullying worse now than it has been in years before?

Judy: It depends on many factors but in our current time it is clear that bullying is certainly exasperated by social media and the general increase in violence.

#### Q: The life Orientation classroom posters pertaining to violence, drugs or safe sex be triggers for traumatised learners?

A: Yes, images are strong triggers for someone who may have been affected by the related image. Judy suggests that teachers not use posters with triggering images.



### Facilitator Reflection on the CoP

Our schools need to become safe spaces for our children, trauma counselling equips teachers with skills to create a sense of family in the classroom. If we are to attempt to end the cycle of violence in our communities we have to look to Trauma Informed training as a necessity for all schools. Judy has encouraged all teachers and principals to consider the Trauma Informed Schools training offered by Hope House Counselling.

#### Meeting Participants

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