Learning Brain vs. Survival Brain: Safety Trauma-Informed Approach

One of the insightful concepts is the distinction between the learning brain and the survival brain. This concept possesses significant applicability across all human age groups, encompassing young students, adolescents, and adults. It is important to understand that this brain response pattern is a fundamental part of human biology that remains consistent throughout human lives. Whether at age of 5, 15, or 50, the brain prioritizes survival over learning when it perceives threats. This is because our brain's primary job is keeping us alive, and this doesn't change with age. The concept of the learning brain and the survival brain is closely linked to the Safety and Predictability principles of trauma-informed care. This principle recognizes that learning can only occur when students feel physically and emotionally safe in their environment. Understanding the distinction between the learning brain and survival brain states is crucial for creating trauma-sensitive educational spaces where students feel safe and can learn best.

The "learning brain" is open to new information, curious, and comfortable with ambiguity, while the "survival brain" is hyper-focused on threats, anxious, and avoids risks. In educational settings, when students experience stress or trauma, their brains can get stuck in "survival mode." This means they are constantly alerted and can't pay attention in class. By understanding how stress and trauma affect the brain, teachers can better recognize these signs in their students. They can then implement strategies to create a safe and supportive learning environment that helps students feel calm and secure, allowing them to shift from survival mode back to a learning-ready state where they can focus, learn, and grow.

Application Strategy:

This approach is designed for **K-12 classroom** settings but can be adapted for various educational environments (Higher education).

The implementation of a trauma-informed approach focusing on learning brain versus survival brain requires a well-planned system. Creating a safe classroom environment starts with initiating predictable outlines where students can rely on. For example, it is important to post **visual schedules** on the classroom walls that help students predict what comes next. There are some other activities that can be used in classrooms such as a **mood meter** This activity helps students become more aware of their own emotions and learn ways to manage them. By using a mood meter, students can easily communicate how they feel, which helps teachers understand their individual needs and provide support. As students consistently use the mood meter, they develop a better understanding of their emotions and learn to express them more effectively (*Classroom Mood Meter Activity | Facing History & Ourselves*, 2021). To better implement this approach, **teachers should be trained** to recognize signs of stress and trauma in students. Training should include techniques on how to use strategies to help students clam down and return to their learning states.

Outcomes

Increased student engagement is one of the first significant outcomes. When students feel safe and their brains are in a learning state, they become more active participants in their education. **Improved academic performance** is a significant outcome of a trauma-informed approach. When students' brains are in learning mode, they can better process and retain information, leading to improved test scores, increased completion of assignments, and a deeper understanding of complex concepts. Another valuable outcome **is student-teacher relationships**. As teachers become more attuned to their students' emotional states and respond with empathy and support, trust is built. Students start viewing teachers as reliable sources of help rather than potential threats. This strengthens the relationship, leading to increased student safety and engagement in learning. One last outcome is **emotional intelligence** which is a valuable life skill that extends beyond the classroom. They become better at recognizing their own emotional states, understanding what triggers their survival brain, and implementing strategies to return to learning mode. They also are able to recognize their peers' emotional states and help them overcome anxiety and stress.

Evaluation and Adaptation:

In order to *monitor the effectiveness* of this approach, there should be continuous **tracking for our students' behavioral data**. We should look for patterns that tell us when and why students shift into survival brain mode, regularly **check students' academic progress** but not only their test marks but also how much information they are able to retain. Check **teachers' observations** as they can spot subtle signs of students shifting between brain states and document which interventions work best for different situations.

Feedback can be achieved through **teachers' monthly meetings** where they discuss certain strategies work particularly well with specific age groups or in certain subject. Another feedback is from **Parent-teachers feedback sessions** where they can tell us how students carry these skills home and what support families need to reinforce these practices outside school.

To ensure the *sustainability* of this approach, the process shouldn't be a temporary initiative, but it should be addressed in the school written policy and culture. One way of sustaining the process is Integrating it into **new teacher orientation sessions**, also **pairing experienced teachers** who understand the approach well with newer teachers. Another way is **offering regular training** for teachers and parents where parents understand the difference between learning brain and survival brain so as to support their children more effectively at home.

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