Capstone Project: Beyond the Binary

Trauma-informed approaches in educational settings create an environment that allows students to be active and present; this is supported by educators promoting safety through intentional strategies (Imad, 2022). This project focuses on the trauma-informed principle of transparency and empowerment through the framework of the survival brain versus learning brain being introduced in the classroom. A modification to this framework is presenting it as a spectrum on a scale of 1 - 10, rather than two binary categories. This eliminates any pressure, and risk in binary thinking, allowing a more accurate identification of the student's current state. By providing space to acknowledge the middle ground, students are able to communicate their exact needs without the pressure that they must categorise their neurological state as one of the binaries. This reframing not only provides students with self-advocacy opportunities, but also allows educators to adapt their approach and be responsive to the needs of the student's current neurological capacity.

Selection Rationale

Young people studying and working in sustainability constantly engage with a politically charged world, resulting in experiencing stress, climate anxiety, powerlessness, and burnout. Further, within an Australian context, many also come from regions that are directly affected by ongoing natural disasters. These feelings are experienced simultaneously while attempting to create change, which could be dysregulating and an increase of negative emotions that disrupt one's ability to learn (Imad, 2022).

With all of these factors in consideration, it is important that the learning environment supports resilience coming from both the individual's adaptability, and the support provided within this environment (Imad, 2023). This framework aims to achieve this by providing students with the autonomy to advocate for their needs while enabling educators to deliver support, and coaching that matches their current capacity. The spectrum becomes a wellness tool, as well as a strategic project management approach as a result.

Application Strategy

This approach has been designed for young people within tertiary education settings that receive regular one-on-one sessions with an educator. It will be explained within a studentship program setting where participants receive regular coaching sessions provided remotely to support their delivery of a project.

1. *Workshop*: A workshop introduces the framework of the survival versus learning brain explaining how stress, trauma, and anxiety can affect our neurological capacity to learn (Imad, 2023; Jacob Ham, 2017). The binary states will be presented as a spectrum, with the 1 - 10 scale. The workshop will also include time for students to participate in a reflective exercise to create their own map for the scale.

2. *First One-on-One Call:* The initial call will be split into two sections; the first half will focus on the student's goals and project plans, whereas the second half will focus on the map they created in the workshop. This will enhance the relationship between the educator and student by creating a safe space to understand triggers, and optimal working conditions, as well as identifying preventive strategies.

3. *Scale Integration:* For all following calls, students will be asked in their check-in to identify where they are situated on the scale. The differentiated approaches depending on scale identification are:
    - **1 - 4, Survival brain =** Requires the call to focus more on a back-to-basics approach with reflective exercises, discussing wins, and personal next steps to work through the survival brain state.
    - **5 - 6, Middle ground =** The call can take on problem-solving collaboratively, break down challenges into manageable steps, and begin to think about how boundaries could be pushed to explore thoughts and concepts.

- **7 - 10, Learning brain =** The educator can challenge assumptions, explore ambitious goals, and encourage creative thinking.

It is expected that a student's self-advocacy skills will increase as a result of eliminating any binary pressure surrounding their emotional state. The self-assessment should allow for actively building trust between the educator and student resulting in transparency (Imad, 2022). Alongside this, the explicit language around the different neurological states is expected to normalise having such conversations as well as self-regulate (Imad, 2022).

Evaluation and Adaptation

There will be several points throughout the program where the framework will be monitored for its effectiveness. Following each one-on-one call, educators will document the scale figure identified and the corresponding approach taken. This will allow educators to reflect on whether the adaptive approach was useful not only in the immediate instance, but throughout the program. Students will also be provided with mid, and end of year program surveys where they will be asked about the effectiveness of the framework. The feedback will inform the review of coaching, and decipher what strategies were beneficial for each scale figure, allowing ongoing refinement of the framework.

All educators and program staff will be trained on the framework to ensure continuation of the practice. Further, as over time the framework will become standard practice and the alumni community grows, it can be enhanced into a peer support mechanism extending beyond the classroom.

Conclusion

By taking this adaptive coaching approach it maxmises practical intervention even with the remote setting context. By providing young people with the language required to communicate their nervous system, and educators meeting with students to discuss and respond to their concerns with the appropriate strategies, it acknowledges the reality that young people are experiencing without stigma. The scale reframes self-care not as an individual responsibility, but as an infrastructure for sustained impact. This framework has the potential to extend beyond individual coaching relationships, and rather create a mechanism for personal reflection in their future endeavours.

References

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