

# Chapter 27

## Trauma–Informed Leadership in the 21st Century

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The 21st century has been marked by war, migration, racial and political tensions, and the COVID-19 global pandemic. The impact of these events on communities is evident in research findings on trauma and education in the 21st century. The purpose of this chapter is to examine the impact of trauma on the learning environment and the ways which trauma-informed leadership may mitigate its effects in the classroom. A literature review will present existing research on trauma, learning in the classroom, educator performance, and trauma-informed relational leadership. A description of the physiological effects of trauma, examples of manifestations in the classroom, and leadership and educator mitigation strategies are provided. The chapter ends with recommendations of leadership's role in modeling trauma-informed practices and mitigation strategies.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Teaching and leading in the 21<sup>st</sup> century require a blend of flexibility, resiliency, range of skills, competencies, and literacy. Educational leaders are tasked as stewards of learning communities. Learning environments are a microcosm of the global community and the challenges societies face. Social issues such as violence, racial and political tensions, socioeconomic disparity, and, most recently, the global COVID-19 pandemic all filters into schools and is evident in classrooms. Educators are struggling to continue with 'school as usual' in highly unusual circumstances since the outbreak of COVID-19. Leaders are faced with opposing opinions on when and how to safely open schools during the global pandemic and the potential for COVID 19 related trauma or triggering pre-existing trauma is high. Although the percentage of children affected by the disease is minimal when compared to adults, the impact on mental health, school, and learning is significant (Imran et al., 2020).

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The Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning Framework (P21) was developed through a partnership between the United States Department of Education, select global businesses, and education organizations to describe the knowledge, skills, and expertise required to succeed in life and work (Framework, 2019). P21 was designed to provide a broad framework and support for educational leaders and teachers to better deliver content and prepare students to tackle barriers of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

Leaders should be responsive not just to student needs, but also faculty needs within the context of local and global challenges. Outdated traditional teaching and leadership models, access to resources, and rapidly changing political, social challenges are barriers for teaching 21<sup>st</sup> century competencies. Any number of societal issues and experiences can result in someone suffering from trauma which can then be carried into classrooms. For individuals who have experienced trauma, the consistency and routine schools provide offers an environment that can facilitate psychological resiliency and growth.

With events such as the COVID-19 global pandemic, the migration crisis, outbreaks of violence, political change, and unrest within communities, there is greater urgency for leaders to develop a trauma-informed practice to mitigate the impact on learning communities. A leader needs to take into consideration several variables such as personal abilities, context, and the stakeholders who will be served when deciding an appropriate style to be most effective. A trauma informed leader is one who integrates knowledge about trauma in the policies, practices, and decisions to actively resist re-traumatization and promote resiliency and growth. Beyond academic performance, education leaders are responsible for the learning community's social, emotional, and relational needs. Psychologist Albert Bandura (1986) social learning theory (SLT) connected humans' social needs and learning through observation. The act of leadership involves inclusion, communication, and role modeling. Schools provide social environments, and modeling behavior is one avenue of learning. Relational leadership focuses on collaborative decision making to benefit the common good and aligns with the concept of trauma informed which relies on the same variables to enact change (Stuart, 2018). Decisions made through a trauma lens reflects the importance of demonstrating healthy social-emotional behavior and relationships with teachers and students and appropriate interventions that mitigate trauma-induced behavior and triggers. Through professional development on trauma and adapting policies and programs to reflect trauma informed practices, leaders can create an environment which builds resiliency, key P21 competencies, productivity, and outcomes for faculty and students to overcome the barriers of the 21st century.

## **BACKGROUND: LITERATURE REVIEW**

Leaders are charged with creating 21<sup>st</sup> century learning environments that provide safe spaces to master key competencies needed to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Framework, 2019). Leaders must be intentional in nurturing and sustaining a culture of support and sensitivity towards the entire learning community, including students and teachers. Considering the varied experiences and potential impact members bring to the learning environment allows leaders to design policies which caters to the strengths while nurturing resiliency within the organization. Trauma has been cited in numerous studies such as Merrick's et al., (2017) study on adverse childhood experiences as having a detrimental effect on cognitive development, social relational skills, and academic outcome. The word trauma is often associated with terms such as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), stress, toxic, and chronic. Regardless of the terms used, the symptomology is consistent. By understanding the science of trauma and its impact on neuro-

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