

Trauma-Informed Adult Education: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Description

This 11-page phenomenological analysis explores how participants' educational experiences in childhood and their learner identities inform how they experienced an adult education program based on trauma-informed practices.

Salient Points

This article highlights the importance of a trauma-informed practice approach. This approach acknowledges that people who have experienced trauma may have possible triggers that affect their behavior and performance in school. One common trigger is having an unsafe environment that reminds individuals of their previous experiences. Adults manifest feelings of isolation, withdrawal, trouble controlling emotions or even develop fear once exposed to unsafe environment.

The author interviewed 6 adult participants who shared their individual stories. A recurring theme of struggle was dominant in all of the stories shared during the interviews. The interviews highlighted the profound influence of past school experiences on how learners experience their adult education programs. Understanding a learner's previous experience can provide clues in addressing difficulties faced in the classroom. Four themes became apparent in the data:

- a lack of parental support at school, along with parental abuse
- social struggle at school experienced as bullying and a desire for social acceptance. Most participants also had negative relationships with their teachers, which was damaging to their development.
- the creation of an alternative identity of being capable and smart, though not academically
- a perception that the trauma-informed classroom was a safe place and a learning community where they belonged.

The authors highlight the importance of asking "what happened to you" rather than "what's wrong with you" as a way to show interest in learner stories. Trauma-informed practice allowed learners to share and express their individual stories and begin with the healing process. This process was supported by the community through positive relationships and understanding of individual's experiences. The foundation of trauma-

informed practice relies mainly on the educators' honest and sincere concern for the welfare of the learners.

Questions for Reflection

As you read through this document, consider the following questions:

- On page 97, the core elements of Carello and Butler's (2015) framework are listed as follows: "a) Some students in the classroom may be traumatized, b) some content and assignments may have potential to re-traumatize, c) instructor and student behavior are potentially re-traumatizing, d) classroom characteristics may be unhelpful for traumatized learners, e) self-care for both teacher and students is important." As a teacher, how would you ensure that your behaviour, and behaviours of other students, do not re-traumatize learners?
- Themes that emerged from the learners' stories were identified on pages 100-103. These themes reflect the trauma-related experiences of learners. As an educator, what strategies and/or activities have allowed your learners share their own stories? Have similar themes emerged as your learners have shared their stories?
- Traumatic experiences from their childhoods may affect adults' identities as adult *learners*. Experiences in their adult classroom may trigger negative memories and feelings of being unfit or incapable, and hinder their ability to profit from learning opportunities. How can trauma informed practice help you help your learners to reshape and recreate their learner identities?

Keywords

Trauma-informed practice approach, struggle, trauma experience

Reference and Links

Wartenweiler, T. (2017). Trauma-informed adult education: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *The Online Journal of New Horizons in Education*, 7(2), pp. 96-106. Retrieved from <https://www.tojned.net/journals/tojned/articles/v07i02/v07i02-11.pdf>