

CoP Meeting:

16 May 2018 (Philippi Village)

LEARNING BRIEF



Creating an organisational environment that supports and nourishes staff and learner wellness.

This Learning Brief was produced by The Learning Trust in partnership with the After School Game Changer, a priority project of the Western Cape Government.

One of the most important objectives of After School Programmes is to empower learners through expanding their experiences, skills and knowledge. Critically, this includes helping learners to develop into emotionally, intellectually and physically balanced human beings.

Yet the science of epigenetics has demonstrated that the ability of our brain to learn and make sense of information is significantly influenced by our environment. Deprivation, trauma and similar factors can literally change how much learners can absorb.

So, how do we counter negative environmental factors beyond our control as we work towards our common objectives? Acknowledging that our work starts with the emotional, intellectual and physical wellbeing of all stakeholders is an important point of departure.

There are many ways to mobilise the required support. It could be built into your programme design, facilitated through partnerships with other organisations or through linking staff and beneficiaries to existing services and having a clear referral pathway in place.

The objective of this CoP was to explore various examples of wellness practice that staff in any organisation could think about implementing. Close to 100 participants from more than 50 organisations came together to think outside the box of conventional wellness support.

In 2017, the After School Game Changer (ASGC) and the DG Murray Trust (DGMT) partnered to find a cost-effective way to help overcome psychosocial barriers that may prevent or deter learners from attending After School programmes. One of the outputs of this collaboration was a publication titled "From Surviving to Thriving – A Handbook for Nurturing Learners' Social and Emotional Wellbeing in After-School Programmes." An overview of the handbook was presented at the CoP by Chiara Baumann from DGMT, along with two different approaches to providing psycho-social support that are both showing results – namely the use of Trauma Release Exercises (TRE) presented by MathMoms and the use of alternative narratives presented by The Cape Town Narrative Co-Op.

A. FROM SURVIVING TO THRIVING HANDBOOK

A wealth of studies have demonstrated how people's experiences and environments can change the structure of their brains. Negative experiences and stressors can have a detrimental effect on the brain structure, which then changes the behaviour of that person. Some of the stressors that many children in the Western Cape deal with on a daily basis include issues around hunger, transport and violence. The brain of such a child – and his/her behaviour – then starts to change for the worse, due to the cumulative effect of stress on the body.

However, brains can and do change; they are designed to change. Just like negative experiences turn switches off in the brain, positive experiences can turn switches on in the brain. We're designed to adapt to our environments. Research has shown that one example of these positive experiences for a child is the connection with a supportive, caring adult. After School practitioners are perfectly positioned to be that one stable, supportive and caring adult in a child's life.

If practitioners want to step into the space of being a caring, supportive adult for the children in their programmes, then they have to consider their own social and emotional wellbeing first. The focus of the partnership between DGMT and the ASGC was to capacitate practitioners to better play this role. The work is captured, along with practical exercises, in the handbook.

CoP participants were introduced to the handbook, the purpose of which is to look at practical ways that practitioners can develop the five skills for social and emotional wellbeing through their activities. Chiara reiterated the need for the practitioner to start with self in order to create the ideal space for learner support, by fully "showing up." She emphasised how we can have a role in positively affecting the brain development of a child by creating positive experiences for our beneficiaries.

The handbook has four different sections:

- Part 1 focuses on the qualities of the After School practitioner;
- Part 2 looks at the building blocks of a healthy, happy child;
- Part 3 looks at the After School environment as it affects how learners and practitioners feel;
- Part 4 comprises resources collated from the Western Cape After School network.



Chiara concluded her overview by reminding practitioners of the critical role they play in a child's life. "It's not always the activity you're doing, but rather it's the relationship that you form with that child."

B. EVERYONE IS WOUNDED – THE MATHMOMS STORY

Given our political, social and economic history, our country is a deeply traumatised society dealing with oppressive cycles of violence that manifest in various ways. One of our more complicated challenges is our inability to recognise when and how we internalise the impact of this reality.

Founded in 2016, MathMoms empowers local women on the Cape Flats to connect with learners who experience barriers to learning. The approach is based on a belief that to be a caring adult in a child's life, you need to have confronted the trauma and related issues in your own life. It is also based on a belief that academic performance is affected by the confidence of learners and how well they believe they can perform.

The programme starts its intervention with the unemployed women who have volunteered to be MathMoms. It helps them become aware of their own wounds and start a journey towards healing with the help of Trauma Release Exercises (TRE). Each volunteer mom undergoes a mandatory six to eight sessions of TRE in order to support their journey towards self-awareness. A MathMoms mentor shared:

“When they’ve gone through the healing process, they realise that ‘Ok, I do have these wounds, but I’ve worked through it, I’m aware of it. It’s maybe not completely gone. I’m aware of pain, but I’m not sitting in the pain and I have potential. I have great potential.’ This is not only about seeing yourself, but also seeing that the other people around you are also wounded.”

Volunteers are admitted onto the programme only after this process is complete. The MathMom is then assigned to 10 weaker grade 3 learners to help them build their confidence in maths “because if you are good at maths then you are clever”. They provide tutoring to learners twice a week in addition to supporting them with their homework.



LEONIE'S STORY (A Math Mom):

“I was raped as a child. First, by a relative at the age of nine, and then by a stranger when I was 13-years-old. I tried to commit suicide three times. In addition to the trauma of being violated, I never felt accepted by my own mother. I tried to hug her once and was pushed away. Today I can give a child a hug even though I never received it and that’s what I’m giving back to my community. I have kids in my class who are also going through trauma at home. They don’t know how to handle it.”

Leonie spoke about a recent interaction she’d had with one of the kids in her class who didn’t know how to open up. She opened her arms and hugged him.

“I got that first hug from that child. And I know that I changed him. That’s the change that I gave. It wasn’t much, but I gave something back.”

From the MathMoms, we learnt how critical our own journey of self-awareness is to the impact we can have on the world. We learnt to recognise that, in some way, “everyone is wounded” and saw how important it is to create a safe space for this healing. The MathMoms reminded us that we have to start with ourselves, because if we can’t create this safe space and healing for ourselves then we cannot create it for others.

C. THE CAPE TOWN NARRATIVE CO-OP

Our lived experience, memories, environment, beliefs and values influence the way that we perceive our reality, ourselves and others. These perceptions shape the story we tell about our society, ourselves and others. Yet each life has many stories and The Cape Town Narrative Co-Op acknowledges and celebrates this hopeful reality.

The Cape Town Narrative Co-Op uses the “narrative metaphor to describe the way we as humans create stories about our lives in order to make sense of our lives.” They shared how we often have “problem-saturated narratives” in which certain storylines become so strong that children tend to become defined by these descriptors. But, each life has many stories – there is not just one story about anyone. “And that is what narrative therapy is about. It’s about developing multiple stories that stand alongside or against the problem-saturated story,” explains Linda, one of their therapists. “We choose to bring children’s own knowledge, values, hopes and dreams to the forefront of the story.”

In addition to listening for more than one story, the concept of the viewfinder is an important part of narrative therapy. It is important to ask ourselves: “What we are selecting and bringing into focus?” “What are we noticing?” and “How are we taking this noticing into building the kind of stories with children that they prefer for their lives?”, Thérèse added. “At the same time, we also notice how social ideas and beliefs (such as ideas about success, beauty, gender and race) shape the stories children tell about themselves. Narrative therefore also involves the unpacking of the social ideas that underpin the stories.”

Finally, we were introduced to the concept of being an active witness for a child. We should understand that “we are all witnesses to one another and to the children we work with, particularly given that adults working in the After School space are sometimes the only legitimate or important witnesses to children’s lives when there are few others around them.” It is, therefore, important to realise what impact active witnessing of a child can have on the stories the child tells about him/herself.

From the Narrative Co-Op we learnt that we have the power to change and develop the stories we, and the children in our care, live by. This awareness and understanding can be powerful in supporting our own journeys and those of our staff and beneficiaries.



D. CONCLUSION - INFORMAL AND CREATIVE WAYS TOWARDS HEALING

The formal and informal education sectors do not have sufficient trained professionals to facilitate trauma relief efforts at school and community level. Thus, it is crucial for us, as a sector, to strengthen and promote creative ways to facilitate healing, and reduce the need for referrals. The above-mentioned models are examples of such interventions and practical resources. In addition, we need to prioritise the acknowledgement of trauma in our lives and how it impacts us as individuals and as a community. It starts with self-awareness and understanding, and moves onto how we then support our staff and beneficiaries.

RESOURCES AND LINKS TO SPEAKERS:

Surviving to Thriving Handbook:

https://www.westerncape.gov.za/after-school-game-changer/files/atoms/files/From%20Surviving%20to%20Thriving%20-%20A%20handbook%20for%20nurturing%20learners%E2%80%99%20social%20and%20emotional%20wellbeing_0.pdf

The Narrative Co-Op:

<http://www.capetownnarrativeco-op.org/>

MathMoms:

<https://mathmoms.co.za/>

“The danger of a single story”:

https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story
