

## Trauma-Informed Considerations and Strategies for Multilingual Learners



As teachers, staff, and administrators in school buildings, district offices, and educational agencies across the country, we play a critical role in responding to the individual needs of students in our teaching and learning settings. As a system, schools function as vital networks of resources and support for students and families, who rely on their guidance to enhance students' ultimate social, emotional, and academic success.

Trauma can be experienced by any student, but for those who are also learning English as an additional language or who are adjusting to a new culture, these experiences add another dimension of care to be addressed by educators.

According to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration's National Child Traumatic Stress Initiative, by the age of 16, approximately 2 in 3 children nationwide will experience at least one traumatic event. Research indicates responses to such trauma, in turn, are found to significantly interfere with a student's academic learning and social behaviors (The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2019). Responsive school programming, classroom instruction, and interpersonal relationships with students and family units have the potential to reduce negative effects of trauma. However, a deep understanding of what constitutes "trauma," who is impacted by it, how it manifests across different student populations, and what trauma-informed practices are found to be most effective in different settings is essential to combating its harmful effects on students, their learning, and their overall well-being.

Within this phenomenon, our nation's K-12 multilingual learner population requires distinctive consideration. This subgroup represents the fastest growing demographic across our national student body, with the National Education Association (NEA) projecting multilingual learners will constitute 25% of seats across our country's classrooms by the year 2025.

## **Students Identified as SLIFE: Who Are They and How Can Educators Support Them?**

Within the larger multilingual learner population, Students with Limited or Interrupted Formal Education (SLIFE) is an umbrella term used to describe a diverse subset of learners who share several unifying characteristics. Without a federally recognized definition or data collection mechanism, estimates on the number of students identified as SLIFE in our nation's classrooms are inexact but predicted to range between 10-20% of identified multilingual learner students (Advocates for Children of New York, 2010).

Typically, students identified as SLIFE are new to the U.S. school system and have had interrupted or limited schooling opportunities in their native country. Considering that each student's journey is unique, those with characteristics identified as SLIFE could be refugees, migrant students, or students native to the United States who have experienced limited or interrupted access to school for a variety of reasons. Common variables contributing to such circumstances include isolated geographic locales, restricted access to transportation, societal/cultural expectations for school attendance, a need to enter the workforce and contribute to the family income, natural disasters, war, or civil strife. Several of these variables make this population of students vulnerable to trauma.

For our students identified as SLIFE arriving from other countries, it is also important to note that the number of years of compulsory education, if any, varies from country to country. Additionally, the perception of the age of maturity can vary from culture to culture. While in the United States a 16-year-old is considered a minor, a child of this age would be considered an adult with adult responsibilities in many other countries.

Because of limited and/or interrupted exposure to formal education, SLIFE often face challenges that are more complex and varied than many other English learners (ELs). There are some commonalities in state definitions of who is considered SLIFE. They are considered a subset of English learners with beginning English language proficiency or development (ELP/ELD). Typically, they are performing below grade level in reading and/or math, often by 2 or more years. They are recently entered in U.S. schools or have re-entered after receiving instruction in a language other than English. Finally, most state definitions have a minimum age or grade level for ELs to be considered SLIFE.

## **Multilingual Learners Identified as SLIFE**

It is essential to know your students' unique lived experiences. While SLIFE students can be disproportionately exposed to trauma-related events, not all students identified as SLIFE have experienced trauma, and not all students who have experienced trauma are identified as SLIFE. Pay special attention to these considerations.

- Academic considerations
- Social-emotional considerations
- Varied life experiences
- Linguistic or cultural variation of group
- Assumed subset of English language learners

## **Trauma—What Is It and What Do Educators Need to Know?**


Trauma is a consequence from an exposure to an event or series of events that results in emotional disturbance for an individual. These experiences create lasting adverse effects on the person's social, emotional, mental, and physical health or well-being. Not all trauma is the same and not all individuals react to trauma in the same manner. Often, trauma can be difficult to identify since students tend not to express the particular source of their distress. Instead, trauma manifests in the classroom in different, sometimes less obvious, ways, including disengagement from learning and the school community or disruptive and challenging behaviors. Difficulty forming relationships with teachers or peers, poor self-regulation, persistent anxiousness, negative thinking, and executive function challenges are all signs and symptoms to look out for. These consequences can be physical or cognitive and can impact students' social-emotional, academic, language, and communication development.

## **Guidance for Educators Who Embed Trauma-Informed Practices in Their Teaching**

When working with multilingual learners who have experienced trauma, forming strong, foundational relationships is essential. Establishing a solid teacher-student basis of trust will play a significant role in the student's learning experience. Many students who have experienced trauma have also had negative experiences with educators and other adults relating to that trauma and its manifestations. It is therefore important to show that you understand this dynamic and care to mitigate this negative association. In doing so, you can first invest in creating a safe space within your classroom to address students' social and emotional needs before expecting significant academic learning and growth to take place.

The minds of students who have experienced trauma are often in a constant state of fight, flight, or freeze. Because of this, a safe and supported community is necessary for these learners to let their guard down, be vulnerable to making mistakes, and be open to learning new things. Building such connections does not require a common spoken language. There are a multitude of ways to demonstrate your care. **It is important to note, if you are concerned about a student experiencing trauma currently or reacting to a traumatic past experience, the best thing to do is consult professionals in your building to best support the student.**

## Practices for In the Classroom

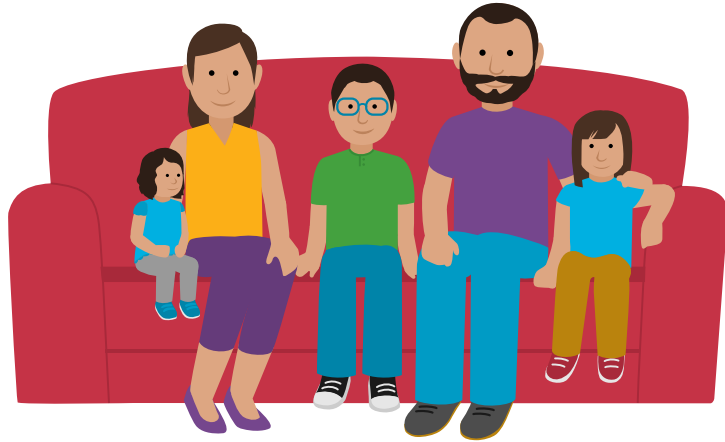
- **Create a safe space for students.** Students want to feel like they can connect to you on a human level. They want to see that you are not just another adult who's going to yell and get them in trouble. From an interpersonal perspective, be that adult for your students. At a classroom and building level, make them feel comfortable. Consider your decor, visual and written examples, and verbiage. Do they see themselves represented in your class?
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- **Establish a mutual understanding of respect.** One great way to get to know your students is by asking what respect means to them. Discuss with them how this looks when interacting with one another. Share your own definition and experience of respect. Multilingual students possess a variety of national, cultural, linguistic, and faith-based backgrounds, and respect can look very different considering these identities. This mutual understanding can help avoid escalating interactions and aid in smoother communication in times of positive reinforcement as well as conflict.
  - **Be human!** When students are struggling, attempt to connect by sharing sides of you they would not normally see. Share your passions and hobbies but also things you have struggled with and continue to struggle with. Open up about areas of growth you are working on and emphasize it is okay to make mistakes. Oftentimes, students will not open up to you about their struggles until you share yours first.
  - **Know your students' triggers.** Over time, you will discover interactions or events that trigger your students who have experienced trauma. While these are unique to the individual student and their lived experiences, it is important to make note of them to maintain a sense of security for your

students and avoid escalating situations. Certain things we are assimilated to in our daily life can be triggers for these students, such as loud and sudden noises, negative interactions with authority figures, and even using labels of traditional family structures or homes. **When you understand your students and their triggers, you can create action plans to avoid triggers and use those responses that work best for you, your students, and your teaching and learning setting.**

- **Be patient!** Building authentic relationships takes time. Your students come from a vast array of educational and personal backgrounds. They will learn, grow, and adapt to you and their new school environment at different paces.
- **Don't take things personally!** Your students express themselves in all different ways, and those who have experienced trauma are no exception. Many of these students struggle with different elements of mental and behavioral health in addition to their language acquisition journey—which can make expressing themselves manifest in a variety of ways, including angry or frustrated outbursts. It might be challenging, but it is important to wipe the slate clean every day.
- **Watch out for secondary trauma.** To best help the students, you must help yourself. Avoid burnout and take care of yourself. As you care for the students, you absorb much of their trauma. You cannot take care of them if you take on too much and do not take care of yourself. You are a human and must care for yourself like one. Love the students all you can, but remember you need to prioritize yourself.
- **Collaborate with home systems.** It takes a community to help our students. One of the most impactful member groups of our community is our students' home system. These family units have many assets to offer that can help inform and improve our work with students, including background knowledge on their lived experiences, preferences, and shared goal-setting for the future.
- **Consider custody issues.** When working with families of students who have experienced trauma, it is important to consider custody arrangements and familial or friend relationships, which can be triggering for them. Learn about their home units and understand who their trusted and legal adult is. Our multilingual learners might not have a traditionally labeled family in their current home and school context. Try to find the best person outside of school to work with.
- **Have difficult, restorative conversations.** Issues are bound to arise, but what matters is how to handle these situations appropriately. For many students who have experienced trauma, yelling or a raised voice can often make the situation even worse, as can being called out in front of the whole class. Instead, conduct a one-on-one with your students in a conversation that addresses the negatives of the behavior, highlights their individual strengths, and poses an alternative, more productive course of action for next time. Additionally, your phrasing matters! Emphasize speaking in "I" statements from your perspective, instead of using an accusatory "you," which can often make students who have experienced trauma defensive and closed off to your message. This gives students an opportunity to understand how they made others feel and reflect on how their behaviors came across, without escalating the situation.

## Tips for Engaging With Families

These tips specific to family engagement may be beneficial for many students, but they take on a greater significance for those who have experienced trauma that may be impacting their current schooling.



### **Consider your enrollment policies.** Student enrollment

is the first step in building relationships between the school, students, and families. As your multilingual students arrive, consider the following things:

- A welcoming environment
- Accessible enrollment documents
- Family questionnaire or interview to gather student history
- Appropriate programming to support language development, content learning, cultural awareness, and social-emotional well-being

**Share resources.** Connect families to information regarding community resources that are meaningful and purposeful to them and their interests, needs, and goals.

- Translation services
- Health and wellness resources
- Physical needs, such as food, clothing, shelter
- Transportation
- Childcare
- Internet access
- Legal and immigration services

**Maintain communication and involvement.** Make sure families have the space and place to exercise their voices. Provide opportunities for authentic engagement rather than transactional activities.

- Accessible communication with translation and via multiple modalities
- Invitations to share literacy and learning opportunities from their home and work
- Invitations to share expertise on topics or experiences

Even with the best of intentions, miscommunication will occur. How the situations are addressed can make a big impact on moving forward.

## The Restorative Conference

Students who have experienced trauma sometimes struggle with conflict resolution. Restorative conferences are structured, one-on-one student-teacher discussions that can help navigate situations. These exchanges use objective, nonjudgmental questions to prompt a learner to reflect on a situation and their response. The purpose of restorative conversation is to direct students to evaluate the impact of their actions, consider the feelings of others, and take a learning approach to the incident or problem at hand. We want students to see that they have the ability to grow. In this way, they aim to encourage assuming responsibility, illuminating root causes, and charting steps toward remedying relationships and moving forward.

It is important to thoughtfully consider what questions you, as an educator, will ask during a restorative conference to convey empathy and deepen understanding.

**Empathetic Listening Questions:** *Inquiry to discover what happened, why it happened, and what can be done now.*

What happened from your perspective?  
 What did that make you think of? How were you feeling at the time?  
 What does it feel like for you when \_\_\_\_?  
 What about \_\_\_\_ upset you?  
 What would be a way to make things right?

**Mirrored Responses:** *It is important to only speak for yourself and your perspective.*

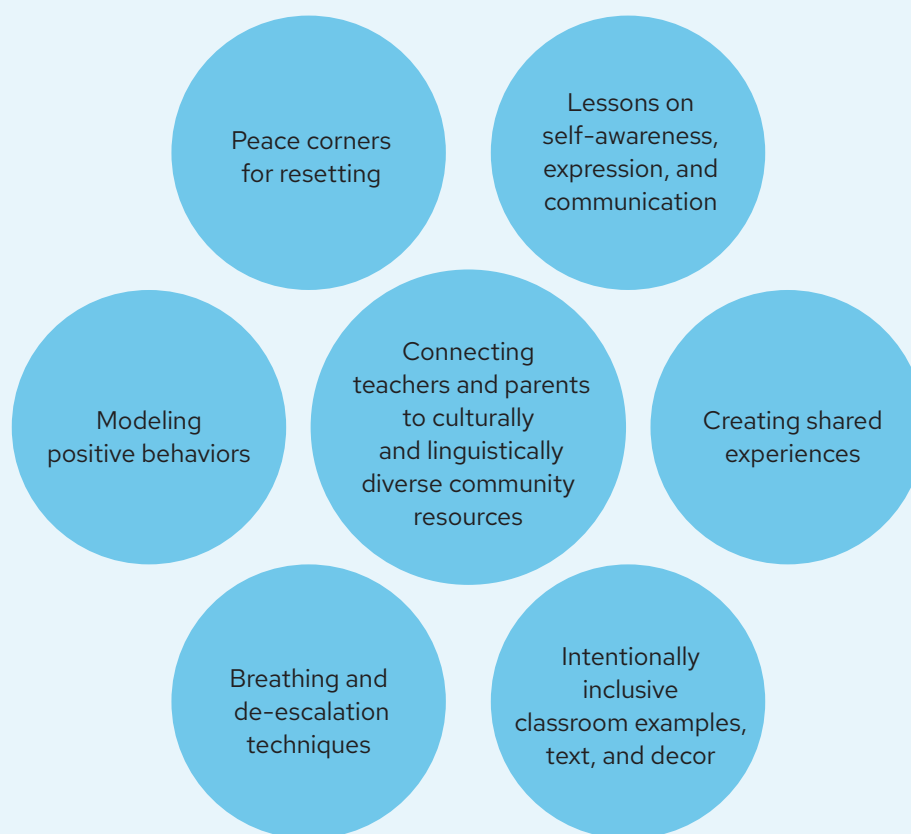
What I hear you saying is \_\_\_\_.  
 Do I understand that you feel \_\_\_\_?  
 I can see that you're feeling \_\_\_\_.  
 So you think that \_\_\_\_ could be a better response next time?

*Adapted from Restorative Practices Guide and Toolkit (Chicago Public Schools, 2017, p. 23).*

## Trauma-Informed Practices and Strategies: School Moves and Spaces

A variety of school personnel support multilingual learners during the school day. A student's trusted adult might be an administrator, school counselor, or media specialist. Or it could also be the school custodian or lunchroom worker. When the adults at the school collaborate to support students, it benefits everyone.

The language specialist at the school has expertise in the field of language development, but the content teachers have deep pockets in their fields. Other school personnel, such as reading, math, and athletic coaches, as well as bilingual paraprofessionals, also contribute to the learning and sense of belonging created in the school for all students. Here are some teacher moves for trauma-informed actions and approaches.





## Voices From the Field

### Building a School Team to Support Multilingual Learners Impacted by Trauma

By Samary Breshears



As an ESL teacher, one of my goals is to create a community of adults within our school who can offer support to any of our multilingual students at any moment, regardless of the need.

I am a strong believer of the three-legged stool metaphor, in which each leg of the stool represents family, school, and student. If one of those legs is shorter or longer than the other, or is missing, the stool will not be balanced. How do I, as an ESL teacher, make sure that the stool is balanced? One way is by empowering multilingual families with information and education and by providing opportunities for involvement within the school. As part of the three-legged stool metaphor, schools need to be a balanced leg as well. Not too long, not too short but just right. I needed to change the dynamic within the school in order to make this happen.

I quickly realized that multilingual students were seen as my students, and I was seen as their teacher only. The pronouns needed to change from *my* students to *our* students. It is true that both my priority and mission are centered around the multilingual students at my school. However, to be able to offer support during situations like conflict mediation, the integration of content and language learning, supervising during class changes, etc., other students needed to see me as a teacher as well. The school staff in general also needed to see me as part of the school. Building this network took time, patience, and intentional effort to get to know one another as individuals, while also developing an understanding of our different, yet complementary roles at school.

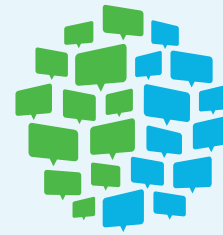
There are still several underlying misconceptions of who I am and what I do; however I can tell you what I am not. I am not the only person who can work with multilingual learners. I am not the only person who can communicate with multilingual students' parents. I can also tell you what I am. I am part of a team that provides support to multilingual students. To the grade-level and content area teachers, I want to say that our multilingual students and I need you, too! This level of achievement is no easy feat, nor can anyone accomplish this alone. We need each other. For this reason, this reflection had me rethink the pronouns I was using. The multilingual students are **our** kids, and what can **we** do to support them?

## Final Takeaway...

Colleagues, parents, and families all have a shared responsibility to collaborate and build a safe learning environment for multilingual learners. While addressing the needs of multilingual learners who have experienced trauma, educators are also focusing on both English language development and grade-level content learning. This is a lofty task! It's important to celebrate the little wins along the way that support healing, relationship building, and learning.

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