



Using a Healing-Centered Approach to Support Refugee Students

Competency

Educators identify the causes and implications of refugee trauma on students. They design a healing-centered learning environment to support students who have experienced refugee trauma.

Key Method

Educators design and implement a healing-centered learning environment based on best practices to address refugee trauma.

Method Components

What is Trauma?

According to the Trauma-Informed Care Implementation Resource Center, trauma “results from exposure to an incident or series of events that are emotionally disturbing or life-threatening.” These events, and a person’s response to them, can lead to lasting adverse effects on how they function—impacting their mental, physical, social, emotional, and or spiritual well-being. Traumatic experiences can include abuse, neglect, sudden separation from a loved one, poverty, racism, discrimination, violence, war, natural disasters, and more. Traumatic experiences can also include other forms of social oppression, such as sexism, heterosexism, transphobia, ableism, etc.



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Historical trauma is also a part of the broader definition of trauma. It is loosely defined by the cumulative harm to a group caused by a historical event (such as genocide, violent colonization, slavery) and whose effects impact multiple generations.

Children who experience trauma can enter your class believing that the world and even school is a scary place and that trusting others is risky. For refugees, their path to your school may be through interactions with US systems that are specifically unjust, harmful, adverse and traumatizing.

The impact of traumatic experiences are so significant that they can hinder the brain's normal development. This causes behavioral, emotional, academic, and other developmental changes that a person who has not experienced a traumatic event is far less likely to have. Seemingly simple things— a facial expression, one's proximity, or tone of voice—may trigger memories of a painful event. This can lead to various reactions, including aggression, isolation, perfectionism and more.

While research shows that trauma affects one in four children, evidence suggests that with supportive educators and a healing-centered school community, students can learn, achieve and begin to heal.

Complex Trauma

According to the National Child Traumatic Stress Network, complex trauma describes both children's exposure to multiple traumatic events and the wide-ranging, long-term effects of this exposure. Complex trauma often occurs with a caregiver and can seriously interfere with the child's ability to form secure attachments. Complex trauma can be the result of:

- Child abuse
- Domestic violence
- Displacement of populations through ethnic cleansing
- Becoming a refugee
- Migrating to a new country/ becoming a newcomer in a new nation
- Human trafficking
- Prostitution

Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

According to the Center for Disease Control, ACEs are "potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (from birth–17 years old)." As stated by [Public Schools First NC](#), "Adverse Childhood Experiences result in toxic stress that elevates unhealthy stress levels. One in four children experience more than one ACE, and ACEs have been proven to negatively impact brain development, learning and memory, social skills, and mental and physical health." Examples of ACEs include:

- Abuse (physical, emotional, and/or sexual)
- Neglect (physical and/or emotional)



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- Household challenges (divorce, mental illness, incarcerated parent, domestic violence, and or substance abuse)
- Community and environmental ACEs (racism, bullying, foster care, neighborhood safety, and or community violence)

ACEs are linked to a variety of mental and physical health problems and have a negative impact on education. According to the CDC, ACEs are very common. About 61% of adults report that they have experienced at least one type of ACE and 1 in 6 reported that they have experienced four or more types of ACEs.

Defining Refugee

A refugee is someone who has been forced to flee their country because of war, persecution, or a natural disaster. It is important to remember that all immigrants and newcomers are not refugees.

The process currently used to place refugees in communities in the United States is lengthy. Refugee resettlement is a global system that helps place refugees in a safe country. The U.S. resettlement process can take up to two years, and includes a variety of screenings. The steps are outlined below:

1. Refugees are identified by the United Nations, and must be accepted into a resettlement program.
2. A non-profit agency helps to determine the best place for the refugee based on factors such as language, proximity of other family members, and health needs.
3. A home is prepared for them, including modest furniture, a stocked pantry of culturally familiar foods, and basic amenities.
4. Services to assist them are lined up.
5. A case manager is assigned to assist them with the transition for several months and they are taught to access resources within their community.

Events That Lead to Refugee Trauma

The very act of fleeing one's home is a traumatic event. But often refugees experience trauma well before they are forced to leave their homes. The challenges they have to overcome to leave their countries adds to the complexity of the trauma they have already experienced. Refugees often experience both chronic and complex trauma.

Students who are refugees may experience the following which can lead to a traumatic response:

Experiences in their country of origin:

- Violence, war
- Impoverishment
- Medical situations
- Sexual assault
- Torture



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- Loss of loved ones
- Poor access to education

Experiences during displacement from their country of origin:

- Living in refugee camps
- The journey into the United States
- Separation from family and community
- Long distance traveling
- Anxiety
- Harassment from local law enforcement
- Detention camps
- Impoverished conditions
- Medical situations
- Sexual assault
- Loss of loved ones
- Poor access to education
- Food insecurity

During the resettlement process in the United States:

- Financial stressors
- Locating housing
- Finding employment
- Lack of community support
- Lack of access to resources and transportation difficulties
- Racism
- Language barriers

Signs of Trauma

Depending on the student’s age, they may exhibit these signs of distress that result from trauma:

Preschool Students	Elementary School Students	Middle and High School Students
Bedwetting	Changes in their behavior such as aggression, anger, irritability, withdrawal from others, and sadness	A sense of responsibility or guilt for the bad things that have happened
Thumbsucking		Feelings of shame or embarrassment
Acting younger than their age	Difficulty adjusting to a new school	Feelings of helplessness
Difficulty separating from their parents	Difficulty building	Changes in how they



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Temper tantrums	friendships or getting along with peers	think about the world
Aggressive behavior like hitting, kicking, throwing things, or biting	Fear of separation from parents	Loss of faith
Not playing with other kids their age	Fear of something bad happening	Problems in relationships, including peers, family, and teachers
Repetitive playing out of events related to trauma exposure		Conduct problems

(From [The National Child Traumatic Stress Network](#))

The Effect of Trauma on the Brain

Trauma affects how our brains react to outside influences. This can affect learning, behavior and social-emotional development. Trauma changes brain chemistry as well as structure. Trauma mostly affects these parts of the brain: amygdala, hippocampus and prefrontal cortex.

Changes in the amygdala

The amygdala is the place in the brain that manages emotional perception and response. People who have experienced trauma are more likely to react to triggers, especially emotional ones. This can manifest into short tempers and/or heightened flight, fight, freeze, or fawn response.

Changes in the hippocampus

The hippocampus is associated with memory and learning. People who have experienced trauma have decreased function in this part of their brains. They may also experience structural changes to this area of their brain. Depending on the extent of the trauma, the hippocampus can be significantly smaller in people who have experienced trauma thus, impacting a child's ability to be attentive, learn, and remember.

Changes in the prefrontal cortex

The prefrontal cortex is responsible for higher-level thinking and reasoning. People who experience trauma may have a decreased ability to think critically and apply sound reasoning to circumstances. This can cause them to experience irrational fear and will affect how they respond to events happening around them.

For many refugees, school systems are not supportive of the mental health and well-being of refugee youth and families. System-level issues in schools can contribute to the distress and trauma experienced by refugees. For this reason,



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creating culturally responsive learning environments are a powerful way to help students from many backgrounds learn and thrive.

Culturally Responsive Learning Environments

Self-reflection and cultural humility practices are the first steps in fostering a culturally responsive school/classroom. As adults, we have to be aware that our ways of thinking, teaching and relating to individuals from communities that are marginalized are influenced by racist/oppressive ideologies. We have to work through our biases and deeply held beliefs on an on-going basis to make sure we aren't perpetuating harm to individuals and communities.

There are research-based best practices that can be used with all students to create a healing-centered environment. Culturally Responsive Teaching is one method that intentionally connects students' cultures, languages, and life experiences with what they learn in school. These connections help students access rigorous curriculum and develop higher-level academic skills. Culturally Responsive Teaching strategies benefit all students. These are some principles:

- A Culturally responsive classroom and/or school environment is a collaborative learning environment that reflects the values of respect, trust, empathy, honor, inclusivity, harmony, purpose, and self-determination.
- In a Culturally Responsive learning environment, routines should be repetitive and predictable. This will lower students' affective filter and help them focus on learning.
- School and classroom rituals can enhance Culturally Responsive Teaching. Rituals, unlike routines, are grounded in purpose and are connected to something bigger and more meaningful, inspirational, and affirming.
- A crucial component of Culturally Responsive Teaching is the inclusion of student voice. Students should be seen as agents of their own learning and are encouraged and empowered to tell their stories, to share their ideas, and to think.
- Culturally Responsive Teaching uses an asset-based learning model that embodies a growth mindset.
- Culturally Responsive Teaching puts great emphasis on establishing relationships that are based on mutual respect.
- Educators who use Culturally Responsive Teaching seek a deep understanding of the communities they work with and centralize this cultural understanding in their work.
- Educators who use Culturally Responsive Teaching understand the origins of trauma including historical, collective, and the intergenerational transmission of trauma. Keep the realities of the survivors and their children central to your work, regardless of the specific work that you do.
- Educators who use Culturally Responsive Teaching believe in the power and collective wisdom of communities and work collaboratively for the greater good of students.



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- Educators who use Culturally Responsive Teaching do not minimize the resiliency, wisdom, and strength of survivors. They have much to teach on how to heal from trauma.

Supporting Refugee Students

The National Child Traumatic Stress network has identified a variety of ways that teachers can help refugee students. These ways include but are not limited to:

- Provide a stable comforting environment and be available to listen.
- Provide a safe community in the school and classroom that shows diversity is welcomed. For example:
 - *visual representation* (welcome signs in a variety of languages, as well as photographs of a variety of cultures)
 - *curriculum* (ensuring curriculum is diverse and inclusive of a variety of racial, cultural and other social identities), and
 - *language* (pronunciation of students' names, use of pronouns, and creating an affirming learning environment)
- Provide clear and consistent school and classroom norms, expectations and routines.

Content Delivery to Support Refugee Students

In addition to social-emotional concerns and environmental factors, it is also important to remember that we can improve content delivery to best meet the needs of our students who are refugees.

Be sensitive to the experiences of refugee children in your school and or classroom when teaching sensitive content, and understand that students who have experienced trauma may react to certain content. This does not mean that the content should be omitted, but consider presenting it in a way that respects and is sensitive to trauma survivors. These are some examples of how content and presentations can be enhanced and delivered in a respectful manner:

- Preview material prior to using it, and thoughtfully identify any triggers
- Be careful not to re-traumatize students by presenting unnecessary details (written, verbal or images) about death or severe injuries and be ready to gently redirect children when/if they begin to share graphic details of traumatic events.
- Give students some system for communicating when/if they need to take a break or need help with their wellbeing
- Have emotional support in place for when/if emotional needs arise (both during discussions and after). You should also be prepared to stop the lesson and attend to emotional needs as needed.
- Monitor the room and conduct regular emotional check-ins with students. Pause and ask children how are you feeling right now? (e.g., thumbs up, down, in the middle)



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- Cultivate positive relationships with parents and caregivers, and in the process, learn about potentially triggering events, cultural practices, prior achievements, and more about their children.
- Don't be afraid to discuss difficult material with students (e.g., global conflicts, current events, etc.). It is critically important to ensure you've created a learning environment where all students feel safe and supported before having these discussions. Approach these conversations with extreme sensitivity and consider the ways these topics could affect some or all of your students. Lastly, avoid asking students to share their experiences with the class. If they'd like to share a personal experience, it is their choice.
- Acknowledge, normalize, and discuss the difficult feelings that can arise when learning about trauma and its victims.
- Solicit student feedback and use it to improve your practice.
- Limit or eliminate assignments that require personal disclosure. If you must keep the assignment, however, offer alternatives for students who may be triggered.
- Avoid policies or rules that can cause shame for students.
- Provide second language support and scaffolds for English Language Learners.
- You can also consult with a mental health provider or child development specialist to ensure your content is appropriate for children based on where they are developmentally, socially and emotionally.

Adapted from: Janice Carello, MA, LMSW & Lisa D. Butler, PhD (2014)

Managing Your Own Trauma

As educators, we can become overwhelmed with the issues and problems that our students might bring to school. That is why it is important for you to take care of yourself and avoid compassion fatigue, burn out and or secondary trauma. You should practice self-care strategies and know when and how to seek support from family, friends, and or professionals. In some cases, it may also be helpful to assess your own history of trauma and consider how it may be triggered while trying to take care of others. If this happens, please see the resources below for additional support. Remember this familiar airplane adage: In case of an emergency, put on your oxygen mask first before helping others put on theirs. These are some suggestions for self-care:

Addressing Triggers in the Moment	Long-Term Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Breathing exercises ● Yoga ● Mindfulness activities ● Journaling ● Taking time away 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Cultivate and maintain healthy relationships ● Attend workshops on social emotional skills ● Journaling



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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking media breaks 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Therapy • Developing a regular mindfulness and meditation practice
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Supporting Rationale and Research

“Compassion Fatigue and Teachers.” *Enriching Students*, 3 Sept. 2020, www.enrichingstudents.com/compassion-fatigue-and-teachers/.

Ko, Susan. “Culture and Trauma Brief: Promoting Culturally Competent Trauma-Informed Practices.” *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, 2005, www.nctsn.org/resources/culture-and-trauma-brief-promoting-culturally-competent-trauma-informed-practices.

M. Shelley Thomas, Shantel Crosby. “Trauma-Informed Practices in Schools Across Two Decades: An Interdisciplinary Review of Research - M. Shelley Thomas, Shantel Crosby, Judi Vanderhaar, 2019.” *SAGE Journals*, journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.3102/0091732X18821123.

Peterson, Sarah. “Essential Elements.” *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, 19 Mar. 2018, www.nctsn.org/trauma-informed-care/trauma-informed-systems/schools/essential-elements.

Peterson, Sarah. “Refugee Trauma.” *The National Child Traumatic Stress Network*, 4 Sept. 2018.

“Supporting Refugee Students & Youth.” *National Association of School Psychologists (NASP)*, www.nasponline.org/resources-and-publications/resources-and-podcasts/school-climate-safety-and-crisis/mental-health-resources/war-and-terrorism/supporting-refugee-students.

Resources



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Refugee Trauma

[National Association of School Psychologists — Trauma Facts & Tips](#)

[National Child Traumatic Stress Network — Ways Teachers Can Help Refugee Students](#)

[Colorín Colorado — How to Support Refugee Students in Your School Community](#)

[Ways Teachers Can Help Refugee Students: Some Suggestions](#)

[How to support Refugee Students in Your School Community](#)

General Trauma

[Principal's Research Review \(2013\) \(.pdf\)](#)

[Jpg of Creating Trauma-Sensitive Schools](#)

[NASP — Guidelines for Administrators and Crisis Teams](#)

Attachment Trauma Network — Childhood Trauma [Affects](#)

[The National Child Traumatic Stress Network — Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators](#)

[Trauma-Informed Practices through a Culturally Specific Lens](#)

[NCTSN — Culture and Trauma](#) Brief

[NAEYC — Creating Trauma-Sensitive Classrooms](#)

[The Trauma Toolkit](#)

[Greater Good — Five Ways to Support Students Affected by Trauma](#)

What To Do If Your Emotions Are Triggered — Helpful Resources

[Managing Your Triggers Toolkit](#)

[5 Steps for Managing Your Emotional Triggers](#)

[4 Steps to Dealing with Negative Triggers](#)

[Emotional Triggers and What to Do About Them](#)

Submission Guidelines & Evaluation Criteria



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To earn the micro-credential, you must receive a passing score in Parts 1 and 3, and be proficient for all components in Part 2.

Part 1. Overview Questions (Provides Context)

(400–500 words)

Please use the suggested word count as a guide to answer the following contextual questions. This will help our assessor understand your current context for working on this micro-credential (MC).

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.

- Why do you wish to complete this MC?
- How do you expect this MC to impact your students?
- What do you already do/know about the effects of refugee-informed trauma on learning?
- What specific actions have you taken previously to support students who are refugees? What actions have been successful and which have not? How do you know?
- Describe a refugee population within your school community and identify their educational needs.

Passing: Response provides reasonable and accurate information that justifies the reason for choosing this micro-credential to address specific needs of both the teacher and the student. A learning goal that describes what they hope to gain from earning this micro-credential needs to be clearly stated. Description of refugee population contains information of country of origin, details about the challenges they are having in school and what may be needed to support them.

Part 2. Work Examples/Artifacts/Evidence

To earn this micro-credential, please submit the following three artifacts as evidence of your learning.

**Please do not include any information that will make you or your students identifiable to your reviewers.*

Artifact 1: List of services

Create a list of 10–20 services that are available at your school and through your district to assist students who may be experiencing refugee trauma. Organize your list into categories as appropriate. For each item on your list include:

- Short description of service
- What audience this service would most benefit
- How you can use this to support families



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- How will you communicate the availability of this service to families

Artifact 2: Referrals
(100–200 words)

Describe the processes and policies your school and/or district has for making referrals and identifying services that can help refugee students and/or families.

Artifact 3: Action Plan

Complete an action plan to support students who have experienced traumatic events as refugees. Your plan may address behavioral, social emotional, and/or learning support. Your plan needs to include all of the following components:

Problem statement

(100–200 words)

A problem statement is a concise description of the problem or issues a project seeks to address. The problem statement identifies the current state, the desired future state and any gaps between the two. Also, include a summary of any challenges you expect to face and how you will overcome them to meet your desired outcome.

(source):

<https://www.indeed.com/career-advice/career-development/what-is-a-problem-statement>

Desired Outcome

(50–100 words)

What is it you hope to see as a result of this action plan?

Success Criteria

(100–200 words)

Describe how you will know that your outcome(s) has been achieved. Include any measurement tools you plan to use to determine results.

Proposed Solution

(300–400 words)

Write a narrative that describes one or more solutions. The ways that you will include the voices and opinions of students and families who are affected by institutional inequities. Also, include ways you can support and amplify local or community organizations that are doing work in this area.

Action Steps and Timeline

If you were to break these actions down into small micro-steps, what would be the first 3–5 steps? When do you hope to accomplish it ?



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Dates the action will be started and completed	Actions	Who will be involved?

Results

(200–300 words)

Revisit your success criteria and write a summary of your results. Include: what went well, challenges, next steps, and what you learned from this work.

Part 2. Rubric

	Proficient	Basic	Developing
Artifact 1: List of services	<p>List includes at least 10 services</p> <p>Services are categorized for easy reference</p> <p>Services chosen will be useful for refugee students and or families.</p>	<p>List has less than 10 services</p> <p>Services may not be organized or useful to refugee students.</p>	<p>List has less than five services</p> <p>Services are not organized or useful to refugee students.</p>



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<p>Artifact 2: Referrals</p>	<p>Description includes the process and policies that need to be followed for in school and outside of school referrals</p> <p>Description is organized and includes enough information for the reviewer to understand the policies and processes.</p>	<p>Description is missing either process or policies that need to be followed.</p> <p>or referral process (either in or outside of school) was missing</p> <p>Description does not fully explain the policies and processes.</p>	<p>Description is missing important details about policies or processes.</p>
<p>Artifact 3: Action Plan</p>	<p>Action plan includes all required components: -Problem statement -Desired outcome -Success criteria -Proposed Solution -Action steps and -Timeline -Results</p> <p>And</p> <p>Each section was addressed completely in a thoughtful and reflective way:</p> <p>And</p> <p>Action plan is aligned with the problem</p>	<p>Action plan includes some of the required components: -Problem statement -Desired outcome -Success criteria -Proposed solution -Action Steps and -Timeline -Results</p> <p>And or</p> <p>Each section was completed.</p> <p>And or</p> <p>Action plan is loosely aligned with the problem statement found throughout the document.</p> <p>And or</p>	<p>Action plan is missing most of the required components: -Problem Statement -Desired outcome -Success criteria -Proposed solution -Action steps and -Timeline -Results</p> <p>And or</p> <p>One or more sections were not completed.</p> <p>And or</p> <p>Action plan is not aligned to the problem statement throughout the documents.</p> <p>And or</p>



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	<p>statement found throughout the document.</p> <p>And</p> <p>The problem identified is reasonable and within the realm of the educator's influence.</p>	<p>The problem identified may not be reasonable or within the realm of the educator's influence.</p>	<p>The problem identified is not reasonable and not within the realm of the educator's influence.</p>
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Part 3 Reflection

(400–500 words)

Use the word count as a guide to write a personal reflection about your work on this micro-credential. For tips on writing a good reflection, review the following resource:

[How Do I Write a Good Personal Reflection?](#)

Please do not include any information that will make you identifiable to your reviewers.

- Describe how you have modified a current lesson or routine to be more supportive of refugee students?
- How has your professional practice been impacted by this work?
- How have your students been impacted by this work?
- How will you continue to support your refugee students in your school, district, or classroom?

Passing: Reflection provides evidence that this activity has had a positive impact on both educator practice and student success. Specific examples are cited from personal or work-related experiences to support claims. Also included are specific actionable steps that demonstrate how new learning will be integrated into future practices.



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