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# Teaching SWEET (Students Who Have Experienced Extreme Trauma)

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# SWEET: THE LEARNING LIVES OF STUDENTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED EXTREME TRAUMA

What is this reality and how do we  
teach to encompass this?

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# BSEC CHARTER SCHOOL



# TRAUMA DEFINED AS:

- ◉ Recurring and significant loss - of care, of safety, of family, (generational loss of culture and language for First Nations people - [www.legacyofhope.ca](http://www.legacyofhope.ca)), of love, of nurturance, of home etc.
- ◉ Repeated exposure to violence, abuse, chaos, unpredictability over which you have no control
- ◉ An emotional shock which has long lasting effects on the victim

# COMMON TYPES OF TRAUMA EXPERIENCED BY BSEC STUDENTS

- ◉ Trauma due to violence - physical, emotional, sexual
- ◉ Trauma due to loss of original home and caregiver relationships
- ◉ Trauma due to FAS/FAE/ARND disabilities
- ◉ Trauma due to generational and profound loss of language and culture for First Nations students

# TRAUMA DUE TO LOSS OF PRIMARY CAREGIVER



# TRAUMA RELATED TO FAS/FAE/ARND DISABILITIES

- ◉ Socially or developmentally younger than their chronological age
- ◉ Slower processing data
- ◉ Impulsivity/distractibility
- ◉ Memory problems, inconsistent performance
- ◉ Fatigue/frustration
- ◉ Anxious, fearful
- ◉ Rigid, resistant, argumentative
- ◉ Overwhelmed, shut down, feelings of failure and low self esteem
- ◉ Self aggrandizement, attempts to look good
- ◉ Isolated
- ◉ Acting out/ aggression



# TRAUMA RELATED TO LOSS OF CULTURE/LANGUAGE FOR FIRST NATIONS' PEOPLE

- ◉ Residential school systems
- ◉ Adopting out of First Nations' children (60's scoop)
- ◉ Foster care/social services systems
- ◉ Incarceration rate among First Nations' people
- ◉ Alcoholism/depression/mental health issues
- ◉ Poverty/oppression



# NEURODEVELOPMENT

- ◉ Develops from the bottom up

Cortex

Limbic

Diencephalon (Cerebellum)

Brainstem



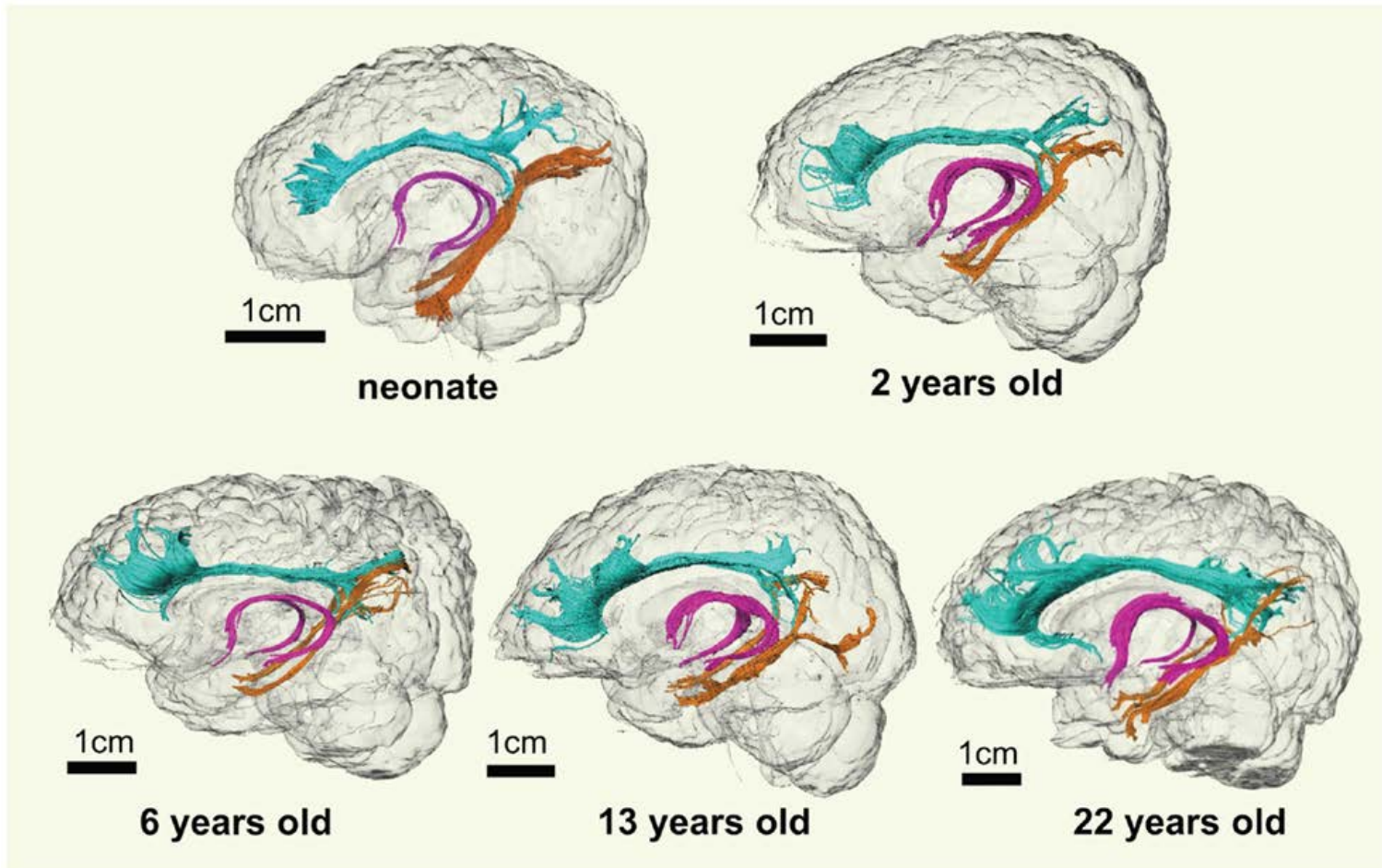
# TRAUMA AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT

- ⦿ “exposure to violence or trauma alters the development of the brain by altering normal neurodevelopmental processes. Trauma influences the pattern, intensity and nature of sensory perceptual and affective experience of events during childhood” (Perry, 1999).
- ⦿ Harry Chugant observes “...We can have individuals who, based on early experiences, are in effect “hard-wired” for negative experiences (Shore, 1997)

# MEMORIES AND LEARNED BEHAVIOUR



# CHRONIC STRESS AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT







# VOICES OF STUDENTS



# COMMON DIAGNOSES /MEDICAL MODEL

- ◉ ADHD
- ◉ ODD
- ◉ FASD
- ◉ Conduct Disorder
- ◉ Depression
- ◉ Anxiety
- ◉ Reactive Attachment Disorder



# ATTRACTION OF HARMFUL BEHAVIOURS/HOW STUDENTS COPE WITH TRAUMA EXPERIENCES

## Responses to stress

- ◉ Use of alcohol/drugs as self-medication
- ◉ Cutting
- ◉ Withdrawal/passive learning
- ◉ Aggressive behaviour

# THE FINE ART OF TEACHING

## “SWEET”

- What can we do as teachers to interrupt or detour a student’s negative path through learning?
- What are our own beliefs/judgments about students and their attitudes/behaviours/abilities to learn?

# STRATEGIES: ESSENTIAL TEACHER QUALITIES IN WORKING WITH SWEET

- ◉ Building respectful relationships
- ◉ Patience
- ◉ Tone of voice
- ◉ Interactive Learning/Building a Learning Community in the classroom
- ◉ Teacher ability to respond to unique student needs
- ◉ Providing a sense of hope
- ◉ Bridging to the next

# TRANSLATING RESPECTFUL RELATIONSHIPS INTO THE SCHOOL COMMUNITY



# ACKNOWLEDGING TRAUMA

- ◉ Identify and acknowledge trauma a student may have experienced
- ◉ Avoid overemphasizing a student's experience
- ◉ Identify and offer potential supports
- ◉ Introduce the student to different components within our circle of supports within the school

# PATIENCE

- ◉ Awareness of how surviving trauma has affected the learning/behaviour of the students
- ◉ See behaviour as a result of “something” and not as intentionally defiant
- ◉ Allow a student space to cool off
- ◉ Circles of reconciliation - mediation process
- ◉ Learn how to be the first to admit error in our own behaviour
- ◉ Be aware of your own biases
- ◉ Again - address behaviour - be firm but fair and always allow a way back
- ◉ If possible try to know your students

# TONE OF VOICE

- SWEET may respond more to *how* something is said, rather than *what* is being said. A student, who is surviving trauma, is quick to think that they are being judged and responds aggressively to what they perceive as a disrespectful tone. Teachers are not always aware that their tone of voice carries with it rejection or acceptance, but the student who is hypersensitive to body messages picks this up within moments of any interaction.



# BSEC CIRCLES OF SUPPORT

- ◉ Boy's and Girl's sharing circles
- ◉ Sweat lodge and pipe ceremonies
- ◉ Psychological counselling
- ◉ Drop-in classes (as opposed to dropping-out)
- ◉ Yoga/meditation
- ◉ Youth worker
- ◉ Flexible timetables - re-work till it works
- ◉ Bus tickets to and from school
- ◉ No fees for school activities
- ◉ Massage therapy
- ◉ First Nation's school counsellor
- ◉ See students as integral parts of the organization of the school - treat them as equals
- ◉ In-depth intake process - identify student who are at high risk to themselves

# DROP-IN IMPROV



# YOGA



# INTERACTIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES





# TEACHER ABILITY TO RESPOND TO UNIQUE STUDENT NEEDS



# BRIDGING TO THE NEXT

- Conflicts - addressing the issue and not the person - conflict resolution/mediation process - bridging to the next meeting with the student
- Staying in touch
- Allowing for multiple attempts /supporting each one
- Bridging to the next community support or place of learning

# CHALLENGES TO INTERACTIVE LEARNING AT BSEC

- ◉ Attendance
- ◉ Learning gaps
- ◉ On-going trauma and crisis
- ◉ Support meetings and appointments
- ◉ Transient nature of our student population



# IMPACT FOR TEACHER IN WORKING WITH SWEET

- ◉ Vicarious trauma
- ◉ Grief and loss
- ◉ Lack of the usual positive rewards coming back from students
- ◉ Reframing - always keeping in mind what the students have and are living through
- ◉ See success in small steps of student change in behaviour and learning and not in large projects
- ◉ Disappointment in things not working out
- ◉ Constant need to be flexible
- ◉ Not being “right” - looking to understand the students’ point of view
- ◉ Constant intake

# TEACHER REWARDS IN WORKING WITH SWEET

- ◉ A chance to really know another human being and to watch them grow and change over time
- ◉ To witness true resilience
- ◉ To share, to laugh, to cry, to celebrate, to build community
- ◉ To build our own honesty in relationship
- ◉ To work with students who are grateful for the work we are doing with and for them
- ◉ To learn how to teach in an empowering environment
- ◉ To develop as a person and learn how to earn respect, how to admit errors and how to re-build relationships
- ◉ To develop ideas with students and try them out
- ◉ To experience another culture and to share spiritual experiences with students

# REAL AND LASTING CHANGE IS POSSIBLE



# RECOVERY FROM TRAUMA AT BSEC

- ◉ Drop-in classes as opposed to dropping-out - Improv/Art/fitness
- ◉ Meditation/yoga
- ◉ Acupuncture
- ◉ Mediation process - the way back from conflict
- ◉ School model based on more or elementary model than high school model
- ◉ Many of our students didn't get to be children - design experiences to grow that part of their brain
- ◉ Establish an environment of safety and respect
- ◉ Always allow for a way back to the community
- ◉ Teach, teach and teach again - find ways for a student to experience success
- ◉ Fun Fridays/Halloween/Christmas caroling/small performances/giving back/students as teachers
- ◉ Funding programs for students

# CONTINUUM OF HEALING

