TRAUMA-INFORMED COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT WITH TEACHERS



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https://dignitasproject.org/tice-with-teachers/

Ilya Yacevich, the Director of the Global Trauma Project, addresses a room full of teachers who work in the informal settlements of Nairobi and asks them what they want to learn about trauma.

"I know about trauma and stress," says Agnes Bukachi from the front row, "but I don't know the difference between them."

Ilya decides to poll the room. "When you hear the word 'trauma,' what comes to mind? How would you define it?"

After a brief silence, teachers in the room tentatively offer up their suggestions in minimalist, staccato sentences.

A shy woman named Pauline speaks first. "I think of trouble."

"Frustration," a man adds.

"Suffering."

"A frightening experience."

This is the Trauma-Informed Community Empowerment (TICE) workshop, and it is the first time Dignitas has partnered with the Global Trauma Project. As part of our regular Professional Development workshop series, the two-day workshop provides teachers,

administrators, and school support staff an understanding of trauma, its impacts, and how to support people who have experienced trauma in their lives.



As leaders in their communities, teachers already help students who may have experienced violence, abuse, conflict or life stressors, and often do so on a daily basis. The idea behind this workshop is to equip them with the tools to recognize trauma, the language to talk about it, and the skills and resources to respond accordingly.
The teachers here recognize the examples that co-trainers Anita Shankar and Ilya Yacevich offer: Domestic strife, fires in schools and in homes, post-election violence. These issues are real to the teachers. They have watched their students grapple with these issues. As soon as they begin contemplating the kinds of trauma their students might have known, more examples come forth: Financial difficulties, sexual abuse, police brutality, beatings and homelessness.

Although these teachers may see trauma regularly in their classrooms, this training is a new concept for almost everyone. Even though some are professionally trained as educators, other teachers have not studied past high school.

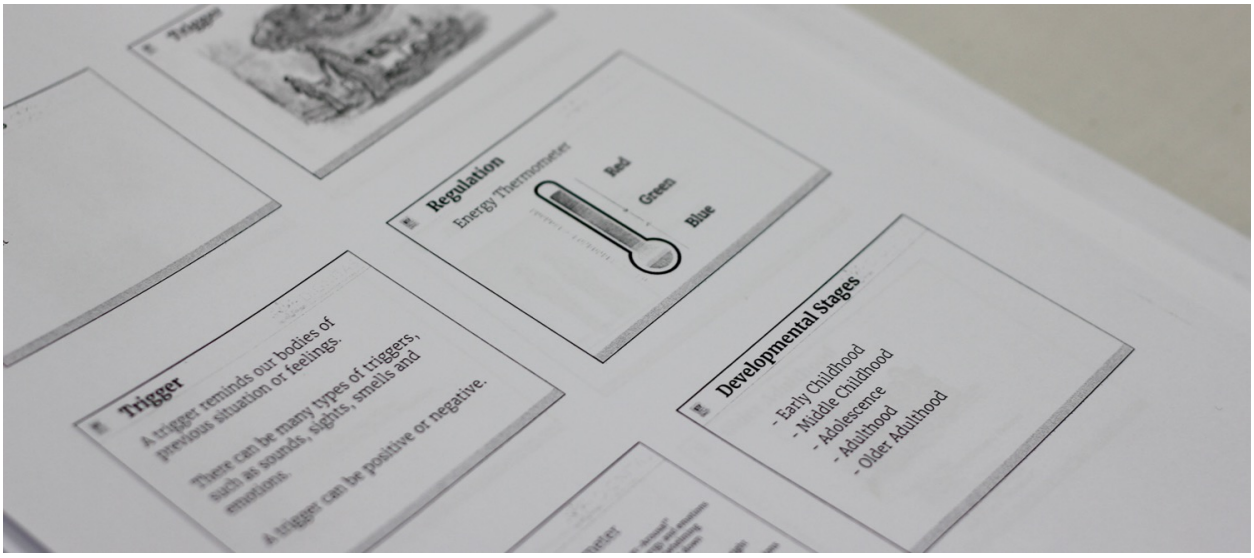
Anita and Ilya structure the training to build the teachers' understandings of trauma from the ground up. They assume nothing. They remind the participants, again and again, that this is a collaborative learning environment; they fill their training with breakout sessions, small group discussions, partner brainstorming and, when the group begins to yawn, stretching. Ilya instills a rule creating a "moment of mindfulness" every time someone's cell phone rings. They both bring in personal examples from their families and childhoods.

Anita Shankar, Senior Director from Dignitas, has a knack for asking provocative questions. She sidles up to small discussion groups to prod, redirect and guide. Anita has no qualms about giving participants more to chew on, or to pose questions they haven't yet considered. When she asks a question to the participants in the classroom, she refuses to accept a vague answer for the sake of time. Instead, with a determined and expectant smile, she gently pushes the participant, leading her with additional questions – "Why?" "Can you be specific?" "Do you have an example?" "What do you think the impact of that is?" – until reaching a concrete teaching point.

If Anita's energy is bright and clear, Ilya's complements it with a deliberate intensity. Ilya takes her time when teaching, and is deft in her ability to gauge the participants in the room and prioritize teaching material. She can make the class laugh, but does not rely on humor. Instead, she pulls the participants through her lessons with care and intentional timing and energy.

First meeting at a training workshop themselves, Ilya and Anita realised the need in the region for strong mental health and trauma training informed by adult education principles. Ilya began Global Trauma Project (GTP) in 2013 to reduce the impacts of abuse, violence, and war trauma on children, families and communities in areas where mental health supports are lacking or under-resourced. GTP now regularly provides capacity building to service providers in Kenya, Somalia and South Sudan.

Dignitas was already exploring how to deliver professional development to teachers in difficult contexts, and in her capacity as Senior Director at Dignitas, Anita quickly realised the GTP workshop materials would be highly relevant to teachers in partner schools.



Anita provides an example of a student who sleeps through class. She shows a cartoon image of this ill-behaved child on the powerpoint, earning an appreciative laugh from the room full of teachers.

The next slide, however, shows a scene of the same child at home the night before he falls asleep in class. His parents holler and threaten each other with fists, while the cartoon boy shelters his two younger siblings in the corner. Empty cooking pots litter the floor.

"Does this happen in the homes of your students?" Anita asks.

The previously shy class erupts. Everyone says yes – repeatedly, emphatically. The group of teachers grows loud with murmurs, knowing chuckles and recognition. Several

teachers call out wryly, “At the end of the month!”, when money is tight before the next pay day.

“Every day,” some correct.

Anita asks the teachers to reconsider how they might react to a student who can’t stay awake through class, and uses this as a segue into a discussion about identifying a student’s underlying needs. Punishing the student, she says in reference to someone’s earlier solution to the napping child, may address sleeping in class. But this is about addressing the deeper needs: Food, sleep, safety, love and connection.

One teacher, Josephine Ouma, is in charge of discipline at Sifa Children’s Center. She recalls Anita’s example of the sleeping child.

“The first thing in my mind,” she admits, “is, ‘Get out! Why are you sleeping in class?’ Back in my mind, I have not thought to ask this child why he or she is sleeping in class. [. . .] I’ve just learned that you have to inquire first, to learn the core root of why that child is sleeping in class.”

On the second day of the training, Ilya and Anita send the teachers into breakout sessions and divide them by school, with the task of finding two concrete steps they can take at their school to increase trauma-influenced programming. The three men from Excel School, a Kawangware school with a student body of over 1,000 students, find a shady picnic table on the veranda of the CHAK Guest House, where the workshop is held.

The men mull for some time over how to best include trauma-informed programming at their school. Eventually, they acknowledge that a major participant is missing from their learning community: The parents. They want the parents and teachers to work together, and for parents to be supportive of work the school does.

Eventually, the men decide on calling a meeting which parents, teachers and student prefects could attend. Up until now, meetings only occurred once a year, and for evaluation purposes, but the goal of this meeting would be to strengthen the connection between parents, teachers and children.

The Head Teacher, Isaiah Mundayi, explains how he will bring back what he has learned about trauma to the rest of his staff: “We have been walking in a path with less knowledge. But now, going back, we will debrief the other teachers.”

> **“From the start, Ilya told us, “You cannot take care of another person unless you take care of yourself. If you are sick, you cannot take care of another sick person.” And from the start, I actually felt it. Sometimes we don’t take care of ourselves so that we can better take care of others. We lose the energy and the morale starts going down. But up to now what I’ve learned is it’s good to have the energy first, and then you can also translate the energy to the others.”** – Agnes Bukachi



Back in the classroom, other teachers agree. From Vigil School, Vincent Orwa notes, "Now we have learned it, and then we will share it back there."

The other teachers also share the ways they hope to change their programming to support students who may have trauma. Some schools say that they want to create individual dialogue with students to strengthen the connection between students and teachers, others plan to hold meetings to inform the community about trauma. "Every Wednesday, parents come to our school to talk, and other things. So we are going to take that opportunity to share with parents about trauma."

"We will check on their attendance," a teacher offers. "Then as time goes by, we will try to see if there is some behavioral change."

By the end of the two-day session, poster-sized papers from the easel paper the walls of the workshop space, touting knowledge gained over the nearly 20 hours spent in this room.

The group's energy is bolstered, and many of them are discussing how they will implement what they have learned once they return to their community schools.

Agnes Bukachi, who posed the first question of the workshop – what is the difference between trauma and stress? – now feels she has a stronger grasp: "Now I get it. I can now at least explain trauma is a bit on the extreme, stress you can [handle] up to a level. But if it goes beyond [that level], it goes into trauma. But it [is] clearly different."

For more information about Global Trauma Project
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