4 CONSTANTS
ACROSS LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

EQUITY-CENTERED TRAUMA-INFORMED

PREDICTABILITY

FLEXIBILITY

CONNECTION

EMPOWERMENT

TALE *Academy*
MODULE 1 - SESSION 2

CLARITY THROUGH COVID-19

"Are you as afraid to be around me as I am to be around you?"

- STUDENT

As told by Sheena Graham, Connecticut's Teacher of the Year while reflecting on student trauma when they returned to in-person learning

_CBS News, April 2021_.

SHEENA'S STORY

"One student said to me, 'Are you as afraid to be around me as I am to be around you?'"

This was teacher Sheena Graham's response to CBS reporter Anthony Mason during an April 2021 interview in which he asked how her students were doing. Graham and three other teachers were asked to reflect on the 2020-2021 school year. The focus of the conversation was around trauma experienced by both the students and the teachers. Connecticut's 2019 Teacher of the Year, Graham admitted during the brief interview that the thought of leaving teaching had crossed her mind throughout the school year. She battled the burnout and despair by cranking up the music in her car and "head banging" like Dwight from _The Office_ before she entered school each day. She explains, "It's hard to do that and then get out of the car and cry."

DANIELA'S STORY

17-year-old Daniela Rivera felt isolated and lonely when she returned to school in-person while her friends remained remote during the period of hybrid instruction at her Arizona high school: "[I'm] definitely sad because they [a friend]...went from being one of the closest people to me to becoming a stranger. I don't know how they are, I don't know what they're doing, I don't know what's happened in their life."

Rivera was one of four high schoolers interviewed by NPR for a May 2022 piece on student mental health and how the pandemic changed them. For Rivera, the changes included low motivation and self isolation: "I've always been a shy, quiet person. But I feel like even now, I'm quieter and shyer than usual."
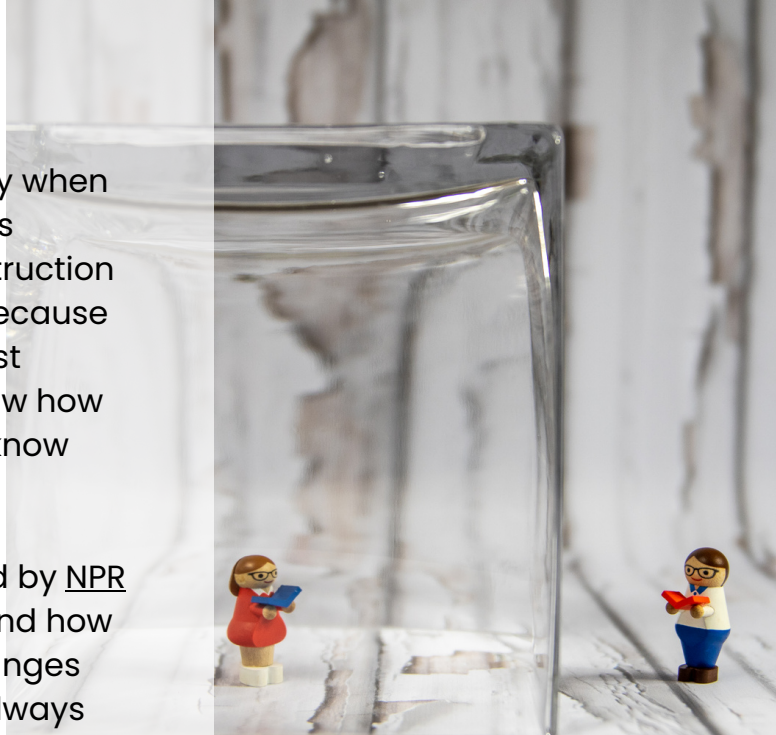
COVID-19 put the need for trauma-informed approaches to education into a blazing spotlight as the impact of the pandemic was felt across all communities. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), nearly 1 in 3 high school students reported experiencing poor mental health during the pandemic.

Data from the Adolescent Behaviors and Experiences Survey (ABES), which was conducted by CDC during January to June 2021 to assess student behaviors and experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic, shows that 44.2% of students surveyed experienced persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness, 19.9% had seriously considered attempting suicide, and 9.0% had attempted suicide.

NADAL'S STORY

Consider the experience of Nadal, who attends a high school in Lower Manhattan: "I have to get into college and make my family in Haiti proud, but I'm worried about my English." Nadal shared with The New York Times in December 2020 that he saw his English improve greatly over just a few months while immersed in the language during in-person learning. "Doing classes online, I don't speak English very much anymore," he said.

4 Constants Across Learning Environments

Predictability

1

Trauma creates a profound sense of unpredictability. Teachers can prioritize predictability by
- establishing a routine to build a sense of normalcy,
- responding in predictable ways, and
- planning ahead for dysregulation.

Flexibility

2

Periods of dissociation and Inability to listen are just two trauma responses that can easily be mistaken for behavioral Issues. Students need flexibility so that they can deal with trauma responses as they occur. Teachers can prioritize flexibility by
- observing and adjusting targets, approaches, and schedules, and
- allowing for multiple paths towards demonstrating learning.

Connection

3

Traumatized children need trusting and caring relationships to help them heal. Teachers can prioritize connections by
- investing in relationships with and between others, and
- being deliberately positive instead of neutral.

Empowerment

4

Trauma most often results from events and circumstances outside of the child's control, leaving them feeling powerless In other situations. Teachers can prioritize empowering students by
- providing students with authentic choices,
- practicing and modeling consent,
- establishing opt-in, not opt-out, policies, and
- minimizing compliance for compliance-sake.

LEARN MORE ⊕

This infographic is based on the *work of Alex Shevrin Venet* on Equity-Centered, Trauma-Informed Education. Link to her 2021 book on the topic *here*.

SYSTEMIC RESPONSE

In summer 2020, the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) won a $20 million grant from the federal government to rethink education based on what we were learning from this historical and transformative period. The first priority for NYSED was to get much-needed resources out to teachers and students to support them in the transitions in learning environments from in-person to remote or hybrid. The leaders of the initiative quickly discovered that one thing everyone needed was a shared definition of what should remain constant within a learning environment regardless of modality. They determined that the four constants are that learning environments must be **predictability, flexibility, connection,** and **empowerment**.

These four priorities form what educator and researcher Alex Shevrin Venet calls an "equity-centered, trauma-informed" approach to designing supportive learning environments. She emphasizes priorities over strategies and puts the teacher at the center of creating the learning environment. "For equity-centered, trauma-informed practices to be a universal approach, we need to infuse trauma and equity awareness into our decision making. This is perhaps the most literal sense of being trauma-informed: when our thought process is informed by trauma. To make things easier for myself when I'm planning and making decisions, I boiled down much of what I've learned about trauma into four priorities. Each of those priorities is based on a key theme of understanding how trauma impacts children and their learning. If I prioritize these four areas, I'm infusing my trauma awareness into my planning." (From an excerpt of Venet's book available through Edutopia.)

Learn from yesterday.
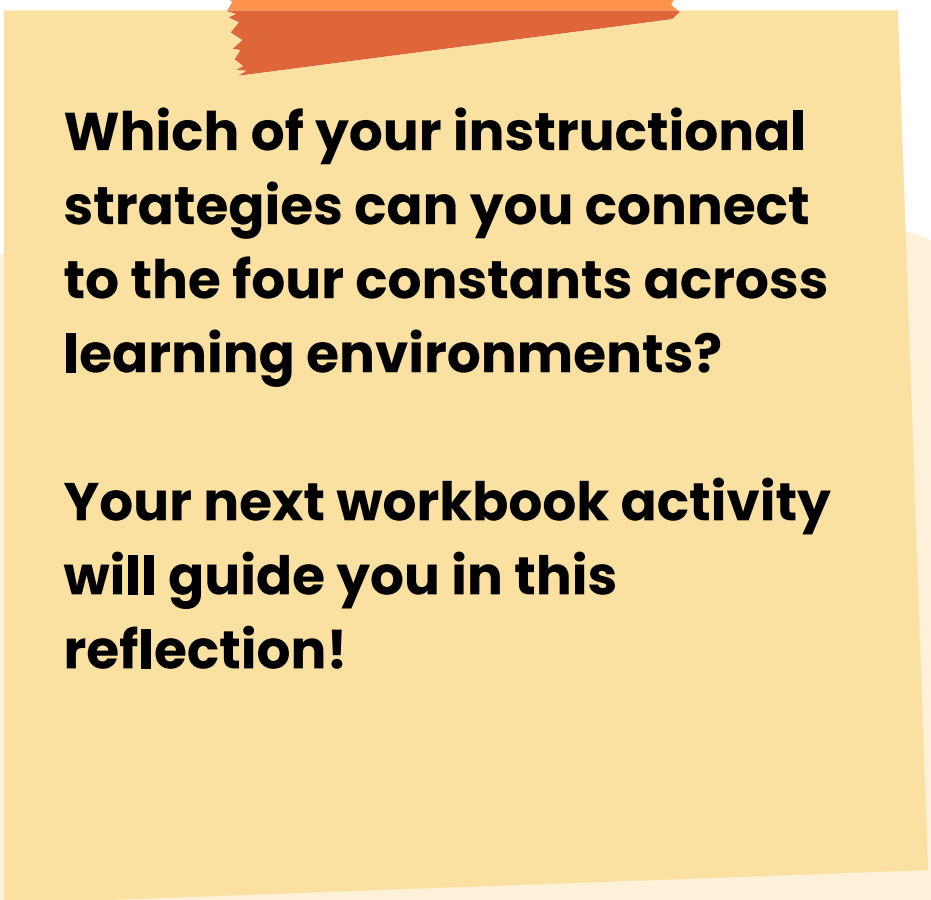*Live for today.*
Hope for tomorrow.

ALBERT EINSTEIN

While these four priorities for learning environments are designed specifically to address students with trauma, they are, as Venet describes, "good practice for all students." As we addressed in Session 1, teaching across learning environments (TALE) is not the same as emergency remote teaching (ERT). TALE is based on intentional learning design that builds upon the opportunities that different learning environments and formats can provide. The purpose of this series of professional learning experiences is to help teachers become empowered to design learning experiences with intention, choice and voice. In this session, you will be able to explore how to prioritize these four elements regardless of learning environment (in-person, remote, and hybrid) AND explore how to integrate elements across learning environments to better achieve these priorities (e.g., providing students with the option to work independently on an asynchronous learning path on their laptops in a quiet place within the classroom while others work synchronously in-person through small group instruction).

Throughout this session, we will return to the "4 Constants" described here and explore strategies to keep them in place across learning environments.

Now it's your turn!

Which of your instructional strategies can you connect to the four constants across learning environments?

Your next workbook activity will guide you in this reflection!

Works Cited

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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