



The Brain Story and How it Relates to the Intake of Adult Foundational Literacy Learners

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Like recounting a book to a good friend but only having read the last three chapters, we cannot discount the importance of the neurological, genetic and behavioural effects trauma has had on an adult learner.

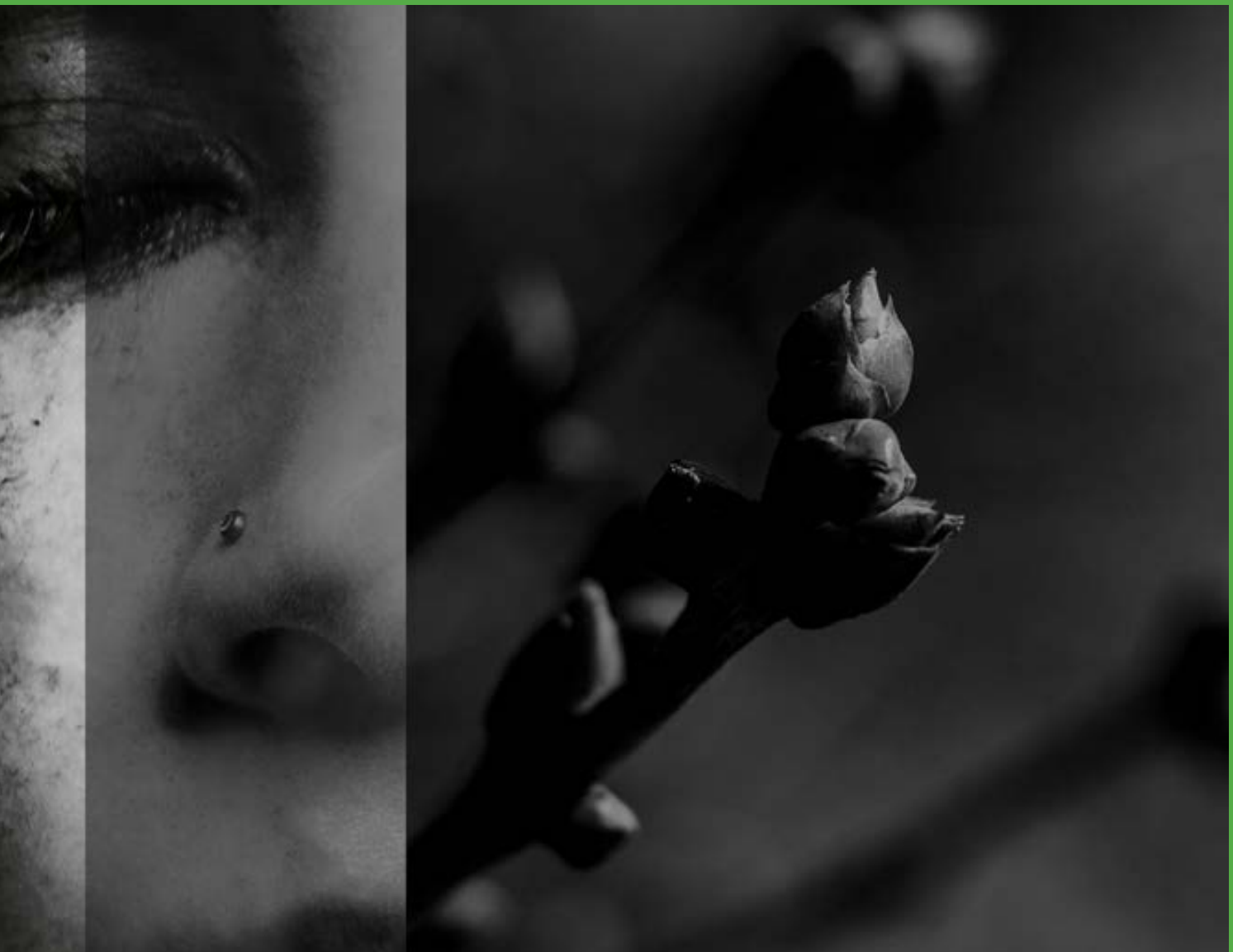
I learned about the Alberta Family Wellness Initiative—The Brain Story—several years ago in my last job as a home visitor. The Brain Story project describes the importance of development of the brain in children and the critical impact that trauma and stress can have on a child’s development.

When I entered into the world of adult literacy several years later, I couldn’t stop thinking about how important it was to first understand The Brain Story and how it relates to adult literacy.

Recently, our CALP has had success identifying and supporting adult foundational literacy

learners. When we talk about foundational literacy learners, we’re talking about barriered, possibly isolated, under or unemployed adults who have low to no literacy skills. These individuals have had difficult school experiences, may have had traumatic childhood, adolescent and adult experiences and, as a result, have not had the opportunity nor the ability to improve their literacy skills. They can’t read menus at restaurants, don’t understand prescriptions, can’t read the documents that come in the mail and most importantly come to the program with little to no confidence.





As I began in-taking these foundational learners, I found that the intake was a process that should not be taken lightly and one that may even take 4-6 weeks to truly understand the learners needs before they are matched with a volunteer or placed in a program.

What we know about the development of a child is that neurological connections are created each time a child has a new experience. Those experiences can be through touch, sounds, sight and/or eye contact and are made every moment of every day—in the home, at daycare, in nature and in all new environments. Trauma then affects the brain

especially if the child has not had a healthy environment to help them repair those lack of connections in the brain. Imagine a child who is rarely cuddled by a parent, does not have a parent or guardian who makes eye contact nor introduces them to the beauty of their surroundings. You don't have to be a parent to watch a child experience something new for the first time. Like a baby who feels the wind on their face and has to catch their breath but their parent giggles and cuddles them to protect them from the wind. Those seemingly tiny experiences all add up to be critical in the development of a child's brain. Add traumatic experiences with few or no protective





factors for a child and it transfers with ease to adulthood. In the CALP world we call these learners 'wounded'.

An adult who has grown up in an environment where there are few opportunities to develop neurological connections and has few protective factors is a wounded learner. The impact of their 'wounds' present themselves in many ways however here are the most common behaviours and medical conditions I've experienced in adults in my program:

- Lack of confidence
- Little to no creative thinking skills
- Negative self-talk
- Test anxiety
- Classroom anxiety
- Mental health diagnosis
- Past addiction—half of the foundational learners I see are recovering addicts
- Victim of sexual, emotional and physical abuse
- Un-homed as a teenager (unstable foster care or homelessness)
- PTSD
- Interrupted K-12 formal education
- Lack of maturity in certain aspects of social development like conversational cues, independent thinking and, critical thinking
- Reliant on others to do for them

When a learner comes to us for the first time we need to be fully prepared for anything and we need to understand that an adult literacy learner needs care and attention in order to better prepare them for their learning journey. As coordinators we also have a responsibility to our volunteers who are matched with wounded learners. That is why the intake of an adult literacy learner is a critical process and understanding the brain story, wounded learners and recognizing common behaviours in these adults is so critical.

The Intake

No matter what the past traumatic experiences are, trauma occurs when something or someone has been a thief of a victim's power. By allowing a learner to have choice in their environment, in their topic and in the frequency of meetings, you're instilling power back into their learning experience.

Choice

Even before you meet a learner, choices should be presented. Whether you've had a referral and you are talking with the referring agency or a learner has called you for help, always start with giving the learner a choice.

Some examples are:

"Would they like to meet in my office or at the library or in the referring organization's office?"

"Would the learner like to meet me in a private room or in a public setting?"

“Would the learner need a taxi or can they get to my location on their own?”

“Would the learner like for the referring support worker to be there for the introduction?”

It is important to remember not to give choices that are open-ended. For example, “Where do you want to meet?” This is a humbling and possibly confusing and anxious time for a learner. Offering two to three choices that are concrete is a great way to support the learner and gives them power. Giving choices to our learners does not just stop at the intake. It is an ongoing process that is connected to goal setting.

The initial first meeting

Explicit Instruction

Once the learner has made an agreement with me on location and space, I then move into explicit instruction. Especially because learners who have low literacy skills wouldn't often visit a library, they may also have difficulty reading signs or directions to find our office.

At this point give explicit instructions on directions and locations as well as where exactly they will go once they find the meeting place.

For example, “When you arrive at the office, go to Monica at the front desk and tell her you have arrived and that you are meeting Rochelle. Monica will call me and I will come out to greet you.”





Be as specific as possible in a professional manner. I would give the same specific instructions if I was having a meeting with a professional colleague from out of town.

Safe and Welcoming Without Forms

The first time I meet a learner I have no paperwork. I simply have a notepad and a pen. I spend about a half an hour with the learner and I just listen. I often open the conversation with “What’s brought you here today?”

Sometimes, but rarely, a learner will need some conversation cues. I find that by the time a foundational learner has come to me they want the help, they desire more for their lives and it begins with literacy. If cues are needed, I’ll ask questions like, where they’re from, how long they’ve lived in Brooks, do they work, did they go to school, when did they leave school?

Remind the learner that they are not the first person to come to you who needs literacy support.

The second visit I continue to utilize the same practices as above, choices and explicit instruction. I’ll have my forms with me and we’ll fill them out together. Form filling is often overwhelming for a foundational learner so please don’t put it in front of them and say “go”. Keep in mind those practices of choice and explicit instruction. Ask the learner if they’d like to fill out their first name and last name and they can tell you their address and the other information while you write. Break the form up so you do some and they do some.

I’ll then have some informal and formal assessment tools with me. My best advice to you is to have many tools with you for assessment. Everything from the alphabet to higher level books. I carry around an assessment bag and it’s very heavy but has everything I need so I can move up and down in levels as well as assess all aspects of literacy. It includes adult beginner readers but also menus, cookbooks, gardening books and anything else I think might be relevant to the learner.

At the end of the second visit I emphasize the tutor learner model. Although I am working on building trust and maintaining a safe environment, the learner will be placed with a tutor. I have the most amazing 27 volunteer tutors and I have complete trust in them. I make sure I tell the learner this.

Personal and Protective Factors

The next few visits I work on finding out the learners goals. I always emphasize to the learner that they will be doing this work with their tutor and setting goals is ongoing and they can change and that’s ok!

In addition to informal and formal assessment, the intake process should include some investigative work. Guided conversations that give us a general idea of what kind of personal and protective factors our learner has in place will be critical in learner retention. A learner who has little to none of these factors will likely be swept up with the trials and tribulations that life brings. With no support, a wounded learner will likely put literacy last.

Take the time to find out who's already supporting your learner. If they have no supports, refer them to these services, preferably before the learning journey begins. Of course their needs will change and volunteer tutors should be equipped with referral resources but initially this process should begin during the intake.

Consent

Asking for consent gives choice and choice gives the power back to the learner. Consent has been a key component in keeping learners engaged and raising confidence.

As the learner progresses, consent will guide the learner and the tutor in goal setting. Foundational learners may have difficulty telling you what they want to learn but I've found that asking permission to correct or teach something new directs their interest. I also ask for consent and give choices to learners as we transition to new learning materials.

The more power we give a learner, the better they get at expressing their likes and dislikes and what they want to be able to do. Take the time to actively listen when you give these choices, you'll be able to pull out some concrete goals by doing this.

Childhood, adolescent and adult trauma create life circumstances that have led foundational learners to our programs for help. It is not our responsibility to know each learner's entire life story but it is important to know that a foundational learner will rarely have a pleasant and happy past. Utilizing intake practices like giving choices, explicit instruction, consent and identification of their personal and protective factors not only creates a safe space for learners but also allows for better learner retention and an authentically learner-led experience. ♦

