



Effects of Oppression on the Learner's Brain

Adapted from Rock, D. (2008). "SCARF: a brain-based model for collaborating with and influencing others". *NeuroLeadership Journal* and Tarakali, V (2010). *Surviving Oppression, Healing Oppression*. <http://www.vanissar.com/blog/surviving-oppression-healing-oppression/>

Student outcomes across the United States show predictable patterns of achievement and failure. State to state and district to district, the students who are not succeeding in schools are disproportionately African American, Latino, low income and/or English Language Learners. This is true using any measure of success: test scores, graduation rates, suspension and expulsion rates, etc. At the National Equity Project, we see these results as much more than a collection of individual student or teacher actions; they are part of a larger context in which a variety of institutions have, over time, created an oppressive system that consistently reproduces the same outcomes.

Vanissar Tarakali states in *Surviving Oppression: Healing Oppression*:

"Oppression is a social trauma ... that impacts entire communities. ... If these (traumatic) experiences ... are not immediately followed by restorative experiences of finding safety and being acknowledged, these (automatic survival) reactions become stored in the body. Trauma stored in the body in this way shapes our perceptions and worldview in profound ways, ... the world around us may seem inherently unsafe."

As students in such communities enter school, they are already managing living in an oppressive system, which means that their survival mechanisms can kick in quickly. Constant messages that they are inferior, not capable or not worthy have a cumulative effect on students - whether these messages are implicit or explicit, coming from media, institutions, authority figures (police, former teachers, etc.), or peers. For many students in these communities, job and life prospects are less hopeful, and success in school may not seem relevant to their lives. Institutions, including schools, perpetuate these inequities and may be experienced as places not to be trusted. This can result in a student experiencing a consistent state of stress or threat in which they are being triggered by actions or situations that may seem innocuous to the teachers or other adults in the institution.

Negative experiences have a powerful impact on the human brain, which is wired to recognize threats more readily than rewards. Research in neuroscience has revealed that the brain responds to perceived social threats in the same manner as threats to survival. When a person perceives a threat, one of the following survival responses is triggered in the brain: fight, flight, freeze, appease or dissociate. In the brain, each of these responses includes a dramatic increase in cortisol (commonly referred to as a "stress hormone") and a decrease in oxygen and glucose available for brain functions that support cognitive reasoning. Therefore, when someone perceives a social threat, they are unable to reason clearly or take in new learning.

For marginalized students who are highly attuned to potential dangers, survival mechanisms can kick in quickly in response to a perceived social threat. Neuroscientist David Rock has developed the acronym “SCARF” to refer to five key domains of human social needs: **Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness, and Fairness.**

Status: a sense of importance or value relative to others; a person’s perceived role in the “pecking order”

Certainty: an ability to predict what will happen next; a sense of consistency

Autonomy: a feeling of having control or influence over events or one’s environment; having choices

Relatedness: the feeling of being safe and connected with others; being part of a “tribe” or community

Fairness: the perception that interactions between people are unbiased and appropriate based on shared standards; decisions are just

In schools, when students feel threatened in any of these domains, they most frequently display signs of fight, flight or dissociation. This can look like:

- **Fight:** frequent disruption, negative language, physical and/or verbal conflicts
- **Flight:** walking away from authority figures, chronic absences, actively avoiding interactions/meetings.
- **Dissociate:** “spacing out,” not doing work, seeming non-responsive or apathetic

In order to become independent, successful learners, students must take risks, engage in difficult tasks and think deeply about new concepts. How then can educators support students to move from a place of threat and defensiveness to one of openness and engagement? Particularly for students and communities that have been underserved, educators must develop classroom and school communities that attend to their social needs: Status, Certainty, Autonomy, Relatedness and Fairness. While a threat to any of these domains will result in an inability to engage in learning and continued breaches in trusting relationships, increased attention to these needs can be experienced by students as a reward.

Through individual interactions as well as classroom and school-wide routines and structures, adults in schools must build opportunities to strengthen students’ sense of relatedness or belonging, autonomy, their sense of worth or status, as well as helping them develop trust through adult consistency and fairness. Doing this work is not merely a matter of helping students feel comfortable; for many students experiencing oppression in their lives, it is the only way they will be both willing and able to learn in school.