I am a primary teacher working in Nauru at the Offshore Processing Facility. I submitted this paper for a unit which I am studying called *Supporting children through difficult times: recognising, responding and referring* in the Master of Education course through Southern Cross University. This is a reflection of an incident which occurred, I have also linked theories to the issues. I thought you may like to read this paper as it gives a small glimpse into everyday life in Nauru for children detained in detention.

I work with many young students who have experienced difficult times. For context of the issue the students I teach are based within a detention centre. I have reflected on an incident which occurred within the classroom, it is also an ongoing issue of a child experiencing difficult times. A student in my class is often very late for school. He is a student who has low rates of attendance and is often seen at the playground or hanging around outside the schooling area. I work in an environment where there are many different cultural, environmental and emotional contexts to consider when educating. English is an additional language for all students; it is not their first language. The student who is often very late has parents who are not encouraging of his daily school attendance and they rarely have contact with the school, if the father has contact with the school it is mostly for his children’s behaviour and their violent tendencies towards other children or staff. I have begun to incorporate the father into taking an interest in his son’s achievements at school. I have never met his mother. I have encouraged him to take this book home to show his parents his learning achievements however small they may be, he is quite proud of when he can see progress himself or if he has done something which he enjoyed. This small action has encouraged the student to want to attend school more independently and we have been making very small steps of progress with his attendance. On one particular day this student was outside in the playground. He wouldn’t respond to anyone who tried to encourage him into school. He would keep his head down and throw rocks at the ground. The boy is 10 years old and of small stature. I tried to encourage him inside, he would look up a bit and see what I had on offer (art materials), he was very defiant and continued to ignore me. I know how much he enjoys these activities when he is in school but there was something that was stopping him. He has a brother a year older who also reacts the same way to school. His brother wasn’t at school that day either but was wandering around near the schooling area. The student in my class feels a ‘loyalty’ to his brother and by not attending school either, this was his way of somehow showing this loyalty. As the students live close by our Deputy Education Manager went to find the parents and to talk with the boy’s father. By this time I was back in the classroom with the other students. The father is a strict and rough man. About an hour later the student was in my classroom and he was very sulky. I noticed his brother was being chased by the security as he had punched someone. The student in my class sat there and he wouldn’t engage in any activities or readings. I tried to gently encourage him and eventually I left the work in front of him as I knew he was listening, but he remained very unresponsive. He didn’t complete any work. He sat at the table and wouldn’t sit on the floor or participate in anything. I tried talking to him gently about the tasks however due to communication barriers I don’t believe he understood much of what I was saying. I had a friend of his translate for him and sit near him, in the hope that he would engage with the work or his classmates. He started to slowly work. His brother came into the learning area again (with security chasing him, he was calling out and swearing and he started to knock over chairs and tables). This further interrupted everyone and left the student in my class, with further ‘guilt’ or feelings for his brother. Another student in my class said something, which I didn’t hear, about this student’s brother. The boy in my class got up and slammed his chair down very hard then started to run out of the room. I ran in front of him and said ‘stop, why did you knock the chair over?’ and he roughly pushed past me, hit me and then pushed me out of the way. I let him go as I could see he needed some time out and I had the other students in my class to teach. My heart was racing after that incident and I was angry at his actions. Firstly, because of the physical roughness he displayed by slamming the chair and secondly because of the way he physically hit me and pushed me out of the way as I didn’t think he would. I consider that we generally get on quite well when he is in attendance and having a good day. The children have started to isolate him and his brother as they also know how these brothers can switch on their overly aggressive behaviour within an instant of an issue arising. They have experienced it many times by living with them within the facility.

The skills required to assist in this situation include establishing good relationships with the student and his family members so that we could have discussed the reason as to why the student didn’t want to attend school on that day. Comer et al (1996) and Bassuk (1997) confer “Effective coalitions between social services, educational professionals, parents and others can be powerful levers for realizing the potential of the school whether for an individual child or whole communities.” The school is more than just an educational centre for the student. It is important for the parents and the student to understand that it is an *outlet* for encouraging mental growth and stimulation, it also acts as a supportive environment where the child can feel safe and respected. The area is quite large and it was difficult to find an interpreter or to find his family caseworker on the site so although I have started to build a rapport with the boy’s father it would have still been difficult to gain assistance from other professionals for this matter at hand. By establishing further good relationships and by encouraging self-esteem the school has the potential to supply a major source of unrelated adults `who can serve as “listeners” and “valuers” (Seidman et al. 1994, p. 519) for young people as they try to cope with the demands of developing an identity beyond their families and with the pressure of the peer group. (Gilligan, 1998, p.15)

I needed further skills and understanding for dealing with feelings and emotions. The emotions and feelings felt by this student are quite strong. He was demonstrating that something was affecting him emotionally on this day. I didn’t know what had occurred within the camp or within his own family life to make him respond in this manner. I know he has experienced trauma and he is in an environment which is not conducive to a healthy state of mind therefore I understand he has negative feelings and emotions which are based on internal and external factors which are on-going. Bayne et al (1994) states, “Feelings are seen as being more complicated than emotions. Feeling is described as: ‘the current physiological and psychological stance of the person and the general “atmosphere” of your body’. Whilst I understood the boy was feeling confused and angry I needed to be able to use this skill of recognising and to have linked it to a more professional way of reacting when he slammed the chair down and ran out. I thought the situation was becoming more subdued once he commenced work with the encouragement of a friend translating for him and showing him what to do but it was through external forces (a student saying something to him about his brother) which I couldn’t control which made his behaviour escalate and by me challenging him further he felt perhaps ‘cornered’ and reacted to the situation.

I have started building the boy’s self-esteem and promoting resilience however it in an on-going issue as the child is not in what one would consider a ‘normal’ living environment. I do believe he is largely affected mentally and emotionally by things in which he or his family cannot control.

In reflection I could have tried different alternative actions, I feel that my *role conception* made me feel like I had to stop the child from leaving the classroom and to chastise him on how he slammed the chair down. I don’t know if this was the right this to do. I shouldn’t have chased him or stopped him to ask. Perhaps in this incidence and from what I had witnessed with his brother, I should have just let him go and not pushed the issue with him. When talking with the students I also discussed the reason why he left the room (someone had said something about his brother). He was in a very fragile state of mind that day I believe, and the comment about his brother had tipped him over the edge. The student who had said, ‘his brother was no good’ was also being victimised in a way, by the students who were angry that she had made this incident occur. I had to talk with the students and discuss how we all needed to be considerate of other people’s feelings and that whilst we may think some things, it’s often best not to say these things out loud as some people will be hurt by our words. I also said it was not the student’s fault (who made the comment) that caused the incident. It was quite a tense and stressful situation as the students were all upset by it too.

I have learnt from my own behaviour that whilst I reacted in a way which I thought was appropriate at the time it may not have been the most appropriate way to react. Zwozdiak-Myers (2012) confers “The split-second ways of reacting in situations during a lesson, rooted in Gestalts triggered by characteristics of the situation, may however not always be wholly appropriate” (p.70). I have become aware that reacting to an escalating behaviour in a split-second can result in an increase in the behaviour. If I hadn’t reacted the way I did then the student wouldn’t have had a chance to push me and then he wouldn’t have been seen as a disrespectful student by his peers.

Based on the reflection I believe the child who is experiencing difficult times has many issues which he has experienced and is still experiencing. The issues the child is dealing with include and is not limited to trauma from events within his life, depression, anxiety about many concerns such as his brother, anxiety about separation, anxiety about the uncertainty of his life and changes within his immediate environment which occur regularly such as different barricades changing the access to areas within the facility, anxiety about his parents and their physical and mental state, violence witnessed within the facility, violence within his family, sense of loss by leaving friends and relatives behind in his country. These are only some of the issues which this child would be concerned about and these issues are deeply impacting on his mental and emotional health and well-being.

The theories and occurring impact of these issues on the child are tantamount to his feelings and emotional state as well as his exhibited behaviours. To make sense and to explain the impact on the child firstly by looking at the *theory of trauma* we can commence to develop an understanding of his behaviours. Childhood psychic trauma is detrimental to a child and it can lead the child into an on-going spiral of difficulties. Terr states, “Childhood psychic trauma appears to be a crucial etiological factor in the development of a number of serious disorders both in childhood and in adulthood (1991, p.10). The child has witnessed traumatic events as well as on-going traumatic events from within his living environment. This can be classed as *Type I trauma which includes full, detailed memories and misperceptions.* I believe he is also affected by *Type II trauma and the behaviours of ‘dissociation’* to his teachers and other people who care about him, *‘denial and numbing’* in the sense that he ‘shuts down completely’ to adults and his peers, as well as *‘rage’* with his explosive reaction by becoming violent within a split second of an issue arising (Terr, 1991, p.10). He is experiencing and exhibiting signs of a child who has/is affected by traumatic experiences. These experiences are impacting on his emotions, mental state of mind, his ability to handle his social environment within a peer based environment and behavioural reactions when issues arise.

Characteristics within the trauma theories relate to this child as he has experienced sudden and unexpected trauma as well as long-standing trauma of witnessing violence within his family and the facility. Terr states, “Psychic trauma sets a number of different problems into motion, any of which lead to a definable mental condition.” (1991, p.10). The child’s mental condition is further affected by his ability to display behaviours of resilience. He acts in a way in which he is nonchalant to others and to the point of ignoring them completely. I believe he uses this coping mechanism to demonstrate his ‘toughness’ to the issues which are affecting him. Resilience is a theory which identifies the importance of protective factors and competencies (Hunter, 2012) so whilst he is displaying ‘protective factors’ for himself and by shutting others out he is demonstrating his *attachment* to his brother and showing him support by also not attending school. He is seeking to protect himself and his brother and to show others that they are a united front. The child has lost key figures within his life, a little baby sister who drowned on the journey to Australia, grandparents who lived with him, therefore the attachment theory can be applied to his relationship with his brother and the demonstration of resilience they are both showing to others combined with the trauma which they have both experienced. When discussing trauma in conjunction with resilience Harvey (2007) states, “The two can co-occur and a child may exhibit signs of being highly traumatised and resilient at the same time.” This has impacted on his ability to receive support as he is usually looked upon as a child who is just ‘following’ his older brother, rather than the focus on his own personal issues being resolved or addressed. Mostly the support of the family caseworker is focused on the older brother as he displays more dramatic and violent behaviours which often overshadows the younger brother and his thoughts and actions. To compound with this both of his parents also have issues affecting them. A lack of support for this family is possibly impacting on an increase in behaviour of both of the boys as the support can be difficult to obtain due to the difficult environment in which they is living and the lack of resources and specialised help available.

The impact of the trauma the child has witnessed and is still witnessing is affecting his emotional dimension. Risk factors such as psychological risk as well as the external influences threaten to cause the child harm and impact on his development if support has not been received. Keogh & Weisner (1993) conclude, “Risk factors are those *negative or potentially negative conditions that impede or threaten normal development*”. To eliminate his risk factors then trauma and working through an approach to assist the child with his understanding of the world could effectively help him to make sense of his life and environment. By helping him receive additional specialist help his emotional state may become stronger and this is turn could impact on his social and behavioural experiences leading to more positive outcomes for him and his life.

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