

Creating leaders of the future starts with trauma-informed education

On Friday, 21 July 2023, the Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls (OWLAG), hosted a conference titled "What Happened to You: Understanding the Impact of Trauma on Learning, Teaching, and Psychological Functioning" led by its founder, Oprah Winfrey, members of its Board of Directors, educators, and alumni.

The inaugural conference convened the education community to share insights and hands-on learning opportunities, founded in key concepts from the best-selling book co-written by Winfrey and child psychiatrist Dr Bruce Perry, *What Happened To You*, relating to creating informed responses to trauma to unlock a more holistic approach to education using the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME).



Dr. Katherine G. Windsor, Board Chair of The Oprah Winfrey Leadership Academy for Girls with its founder, Oprah Winfrey. Image supplied

"Having a premier education when you come from a background of challenges, is not enough. I thought if you offer the education and the opportunity - if you open the door these girls will be able to step in, develop their wings and soar ... I didn't realise how past traumas would show up," said Winfrey.

Throughout the day, sessions aimed to create an understanding that while children are learning, they need regulatory breaks to get back in balance so that they perform better academically, they can retrieve what they've learned more readily, and they can retain content more easily. Additionally, attending guests were able to obtain Continuing Professional Development (CPD) accreditation points for attending the training sessions.

According to Dr Perry, “Leaders of the future and the best leaders on the planet have all experienced hardship – you cannot become wise without having experienced pain, but wisdom comes after there’s been some healing.”



The What Happend to You conference took place on 21 July 2023 in Mdrand. Image supplied

During the day-long conference, Gugulethu Ndebele, executive director at OWLAG, spoke about the opportunity to expand the reach of this model in education, social work and beyond. She shared proof of concept evidenced through the resiliency shown by the OWLAG learners during the Covid-19 pandemic, as they utilized coping mechanisms based on their NME training.

“Trauma-informed learning is an essential component to world-class education,” said Gugulethu Ndebele. “It is not just what damaged children need – it’s what all children need.”

Developed by Dr Perry, the NME is a framework that helps support educators and learners in learning more about brain development and the impact of childhood trauma on a child's ability to function in a classroom. It emphasises the importance of recognising the sequential organisation of brain development and the influence of traumatic experiences on this process.

When applied to learning environments, the NME offers several valuable contributions in creating informed responses to trauma by building a renewed sense of personal self-worth and ultimately recalibrate our responses to circumstances, situations, and relationships. It is the key to reshaping learners our very lives, and nurturing the leaders we need for tomorrow – in South Africa and beyond.

“I have seen first-hand the long-lasting impact that trauma can have on a person, and my intention is to share this approach with every educator, counsellor, physician and parent so they have the opportunity to implement this in their daily lives,” Winfrey explained.

“The ultimate dream for me is to create leaders for the world who are whole people. Not perfect people, but whole people. Because there is no life without a full, emotional, spiritual wholeness that allows you to lead from the strength of yourself

and not from all the broken pieces of yourself.”

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