Adversity, Stress, and Learning: The Role of Neurophysiological Function

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We all encounter stressors, from our morning commute to more serious problems like a family illness. When we encounter stressors and challenges, our body's neurophysiological systems respond to provide the metabolic resources – the energy – that we need to overcome them. However, when stressors are encountered frequently or chronically, they can become embedded in the rhythms and patterns of people's neurophysiological function. This is true for adults, but it is also true for children. The potential for stressors to become embedded in children's neurophysiological function is one reason that experiencing high levels of adversity in childhood, such as that associated with poverty, maltreatment, racism, and discrimination, can undermine children's development in general, and, in particular, their capacity to learn. Accepting the mantle of teaching as not only a human but a humane endeavor requires educators to ask what they can do to alleviate the impacts of adversity and stress on their students, whether those students are young children in the early education classroom or adults in college settings.