
From the national Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA

Comparing the Concepts of ACEs and Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Understanding and addressing the challenges that hinder student development and academic success requires a comprehensive grasp of the factors that impact young people's lives. Two key concepts—"Adverse Childhood Experiences" (ACEs) and "Barriers to Learning and Teaching"—offer distinct but related lenses for examining the obstacles that interfere with student learning, behavior, health, and overall well-being. The following comparison of the two concepts aims to clarify the differences, intersections, and some implications for efforts to promote well-being and ameliorate learning, behavior, and emotional problems.

1. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)

Origin: Public health and psychology fields.

Definition:

-Adverse childhood experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years). (CDC, 2024)

-ACEs are disruptions to the promotion of safe, stable, and nurturing family relationships and are characterized by stressful or traumatic events that occur during an individual's

first 18 years of life. (American Psychiatric Association, 2025)

They can have long-term effects on health, behavior, and learning.

Examples include:

- Experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect (physical, emotional, sexual).
- Witnessing violence in the home or community.
- Having a family member attempt or die by suicide.
- Growing up in a household with substance use problems, mental health issues, or instability due to incarceration, domestic violence, separation, or divorce.
- Other traumatic experiences such as homelessness, unstable housing, or food insecurity.

Focus:

Primarily on providing psychological and physiological interventions for individuals identified as having been traumatized. Also used to predict risk for mental health issues, chronic disease, and behavioral problems.

Implications for Schools:

Encourages schools to recognize signs of trauma in a student and to respond with trauma-informed practices.

2. Barriers to Learning and Teaching

Origin: Multidisciplinary reciprocal determinist approach to understanding human behavior.

Definition:

-This concept refers to a broad range of transacting negative environmental and personal conditions that interfere with student learning and effective teaching (Adelman & Taylor, 2017).

-Obstacles that prevent students from fully engaging with the curriculum and achieving their potential stemming from a wide range of factors, including cognitive, emotional, social, and environmental influences (Gawish & Main, (2021).

Examples include:

- Neighborhood: economically deprived, high mobility, violence, drugs, homelessness.
- Family: chronically impoverished, at-risk immigrant status, conflicts, violence, poor child care.
- School and peers: poor quality school, negative encounters with staff and peers.
- Individual factors: health problems, difficult temperament, English Language Learner, boredom, disengagement.

Focus:

Improving and transforming intervention systems to more effectively address barriers to learning and teaching on a large scale. Emphasis is on four interconnected concerns:

- Policy changes to end marginalization of institutional efforts.
- Unifying fragmented approaches into a comprehensive and equitable system.
- Reworking institutional operational infrastructure for effective implementation.
- Enhancing systemic institutional changes for sustainability and scalability.

Implications for Schools:

Research and development efforts indicate the need to transform the current marginalized and fragmented approach found in schools into a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of interventions. Such a system encompasses a full continuum of classroom and schoolwide interventions, with each facet of the continuum organized across six student/learning support domains and. Development of the system requires school-community collaboration and redeployment of allocated resources.

Comparison Table

Concept	Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs)	Barriers to Learning and Teaching
Origin	Public health & psychology	Multidisciplinary, reciprocal determinist
Definition	Traumatic events in childhood with long-term effects	Environmental & personal conditions interfering with learning & teaching
Examples	Abuse, neglect, household dysfunction, homelessness	Neighborhood, family, school/peer, individual factors
Focus	Individual trauma; predicting risk for mental/physical health issues	Institutional improvement/ transformation of marginalized & fragmented interventions
Implications for Schools	Trauma-informed practices for identified students	Development of a unified, comprehensive, and equitable system of student/learning supports using school-community collaboration and resource redeployment

References

Adelman, H.S., & Taylor, L. (2017). *Addressing Barriers to Learning: In the Classroom and Schoolwide*. Center for MH in Schools & Student/Learning Supports at UCLA. <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/55w7b8x8>

American Psychiatric Association. (2025). *What are ACEs?* <https://www.apaf.org/our-programs/justice/free-resources/what-are-aces/>

CDC. (2024). *About Adverse Childhood Experiences*. <https://www.cdc.gov/aces/about/index.html>

Gawish, A., & Main P. (2021). *Barriers to Learning: A teacher's guide*. Structural Learning. <https://www.structural-learning.com/post/barriers-to-learning-a-teachers-guide#:~:text=Barriers%20to%20learning%20are%20the%20obstacles%20that,impact%20both%20lifelong%20learning%20and%20academic%20progress.>
