

# Creating Trauma-Informed Schools: Strategies and Practices

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## ABSTRACT

This paper examines the development and implementation of trauma-informed approaches within educational settings to address the growing mental health needs of students, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and increasing exposure to violence and adversity. Trauma-informed education acknowledges the profound impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on learning, behavior, and emotional development. Despite the proliferation of trauma-related training programs, many educators feel ill-equipped to apply these frameworks in daily classroom settings. The study identifies five core strategies to create trauma-sensitive classrooms: building strong relationships, understanding trauma's impact, creating calming learning environments, differentiated instruction, and maintaining student engagement. It further examines institutional frameworks for Trauma-Informed Care (TIC), staff training, community collaboration, and systems of monitoring and evaluation. Through qualitative case studies, the paper highlights best practices and implementation challenges faced by schools adopting trauma-informed models. Recommendations are offered to bridge the gap between theory and classroom practice, ultimately advocating for systemic and sustainable change.

**Keywords:** Trauma-Informed Education, Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), Mental Health in Schools, Trauma-Informed Practices, Social-Emotional Learning, Student Engagement, Teacher Training, School-Based Interventions.

## INTRODUCTION

Trauma-informed education is an emerging concept for schools and teachers that takes into consideration children's difficult life experiences. Schools are focusing on children's mental health and well-being after the pandemic. Efforts to react to the impact of COVID-19 include putting school counselors in classrooms to "heal" children. Strategies to better support children who have witnessed violent events, including mass shootings, have turned into school-wide, large-scale programs that are funded and launched into schools almost overnight. But the teachers often feel unprepared to deliver the training and programs. The concept of trauma-informed education has emerged and is gaining attention by schools across the country. There are trainings and frameworks that schools can adopt in hopes of better meeting the needs of children's mental health. However, trainings and frameworks often lack actionable strategies for teachers to implement in classrooms. All schools have children who come to school with traumatic histories stemming from exposure to poverty, family dysfunction and disruption, violence, and abuse. Many schools have adopted trauma-informed approaches with the intention of making schools more inclusive and supportive. The success of trauma-informed programs relies on school-wide efforts to implement systemic changes, establish school-wide safety and security, and prioritize trauma-informed literacy training. However, the classroom is where healing happens or does not happen when it comes to trauma-informed education; it is where children spend most of their waking hours and may feel its most intensive impact. Therefore, teachers need classroom-specific strategies. Teachers are the ones responsible for the bulk of the implementation of trauma-informed approaches. This paper identifies five trauma-informed strategies that can be used daily in the classroom: building strong relationships; understanding children with trauma; creating a structured, calming learning environment; teaching through differentiation; and engaging children in daily lessons [1, 2].

### Understanding Trauma

Just as the mission of a school is primarily academic, so too schools must assess and determine what the mission is with regard to children who have been physically abused or sexually molested before any such students walk through the door. This population of high-risk children is a varied group and may be brought to a school after a history of severe school failure or for the first time, after control issues and violent behaviors have resulted in possible expulsion. In addressing their needs, a school board may wish to: redeploy current faculty and choose current staff according to specialized training; implement policies that restructure suspension/expulsion rather than preclude attendance to an alternative school; have classes housed in a separate wing or school building altogether; and assign contracts or stipends for pre- and inservice training on trauma-related dynamics or for therapeutic consultation in the school setting. With regard to less severe short- or long-term trauma, teachers & educational staff receive training in how to respond to disruptive or exquisitely sympathetic behaviour. Any strategies that effectively teach all children pro-social skills, expectations and behaviours will, by default, support children dealing with trauma, whether short- or long-term. The challenges children face make it difficult for them to feel safe, secure and supported in their environment. As a result, these children cannot function well unless their school's teachers and staff are attuned to the conditions they live in and the emotional states they bring to school. Work in a trauma-sensitive school is intense because a significant majority of children live with violence, neglect, and abuse. Five strategies that work well include: building strong relationships; understanding children with trauma; creating a structured, calming learning environment; teaching through differentiation; and engaging children in daily lessons. Each strategy focuses on helping children who have experienced trauma in their home and can be used by any classroom teacher to help improve the community, relationships, and behaviors of children who have experienced trauma. The teacher's relationships with children and parents, as well as children's relationships with each other, are key to optimum classroom success. Creating strong bonds where children feel safe and can have trusting relationships helps build a classroom where traumatized children can learn and grow. It is important to understand that parents of at-risk children often shy away from being involved or even appearing at school. Teachers must try to make school a safe and caring place for both children and their parents [3, 4].

### Principles of Trauma-Informed Care

Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) refers to how an organization adopts a new mindset and understanding of trauma, thereby guiding how all staff members interact and react to problems. TIC does not focus on a specific program but represents an understanding of the impact and effects of trauma. Universities and schools then become responsible for promoting education, awareness, and understanding of trauma collectively, followed by individuals having responsibility for their actions and reactions. TIC as a program did not currently exist at the two schools; rather, they operated with a TIC mentality. Each school approached self-care and health in different ways. TIC approaches are centered on collectively looking out for each other, understanding the impact of trauma, building relationships, and practicing mindfulness. Staff members overwhelmingly described job satisfaction, feeling welcomed, and having an outlet for venting; however, one staff member did mention burnout. Despite the TIC approaches surrounding the staff, all staff members brought up a lack of understanding and education on trauma. Though most staff members could name a trauma and said it greatly affected them, many could not exactly say what trauma was or how it affected the youth. Although training and professional development in TIC were available, many of the staff had not participated. Because the staff themselves had not been attended to and educated regarding their trauma, their attempts to provide these services to youth were disrupted. The staff's understanding of their trauma and, by extension, the youth's trauma is pertinent to the effectiveness of the care given. The staff had done a great job of supporting each other and team building; however, this became a temporary fix, as the issues between the teachers and youth were still unaddressed. Awareness and education were extremely important as they are both a readiness and a stepping stone toward TIC. Despite the issues raised, the foundation of TIC and the environment cultivated were great. With education and awareness regarding trauma, this foundation would be able to flourish further, benefiting both staff members and youth [5, 6].

### Creating a Trauma-Informed School Environment

As primary responses to childhood trauma shift from psychiatry to education, the role of schools in trauma prevention and intervention has gained attention. Public schools, with daily contact with children, are vital resources. School personnel, especially teachers, foster a sense of belonging, while social workers can alert authorities to abuse, thereby preventing further harm. Teachers are also positioned to identify

at-risk children and implement resilience-building strategies. This study explores the implementation of trauma-informed educational systems, where all school community members can identify, understand, and respond effectively to mitigate trauma's impact. The framework focuses on universal social-emotional and mental health needs, like developing regulatory skills and supportive environments, alongside intensive supports like counseling for those in need. Trauma-Informed (TI) schools create safe spaces where children feel respected and empowered, learning enduring skills in emotion and behavior regulation. The school community acknowledges trauma's effects on behavior and academic success, working collectively to teach health-promoting skills. While not a comprehensive solution, a trauma-informed school system addresses developmental deficits caused by trauma. It consists of three main components, emphasizing knowledge of trauma's effects on empathy, stress responses, and behavior. Many children in the US have experienced trauma, making TI systems essential for academic success. Two main TI strategies involve respectful adult responses to help children achieve optimal arousal levels and teaching emotional awareness and alternative behavioral responses [7, 8].

### **Building Relationships with Students**

It is increasingly evident that educating the heart as well as the mind is crucial for the well-being of children, schools, and the academic community as a whole. In childhood, learning, emotion, and existence are intertwined. Young children's mental health is inextricably linked to their physical health, their feelings, their friends, their teachers, and their families. The interdependence of learning and wellbeing only becomes more complex with age. Clearly, schools can either help or hinder students' development of their well-being. A classroom is an emotional space where students and teachers want to feel safe, appreciated, and respected. It is a place where students can thrive. No learning can happen until trust is established. Trauma-sensitive classrooms are safe, trusting environments that help students feel that they belong. Educators and schools can cultivate a sense of community by regularly communicating high expectations of students, listening to student concerns, collaborating in group projects, and developing solutions that reflect the best interests of all. Classroom norms can be dynamically developed as an equal partnership between teachers and students. Trauma-sensitive schools promote student engagement through well-timed collaboration opportunities, recognizing that emotional regulation and learning engagement are on the same neurological loop. In classrooms, teachers model emotional regulation, use a variety of strategies to change the pace of learning, and get students up, moving, and adjusting the content delivery modalities throughout a lesson. With behavioural expectations, routines are considered proactively, explicitly taught, and modelled [9, 10].

### **Training Staff on Trauma-Informed Practices**

It is well-documented that trauma varies in intensity and frequency, and that when students experience trauma and its associated symptoms, it can have a great impact on their ability to engage in the school setting positively. Trauma-informed care (TIC) has been defined as a specific approach to service delivery that recognizes the presence of trauma symptoms and acknowledges their role in behavior. TIC supports youth impacted by trauma in the school setting in various areas, such as identifying trauma symptoms, situations in which the student feels less safe, and empowering students to utilize appropriate self-regulatory tools. TIC, along with other trauma-informed approaches, has been successfully implemented through various school-based programs and training for educators. Programs such as the Sanctuary Model, Risking Connection, and school-wide Cognitive Behavioral Intervention for Trauma in Schools (CBITS) are being adopted widely across the nation to help educators understand trauma's effect on learning, brain development, and student-teacher interactions. Several important components and frameworks emerge concerning understanding trauma in education. Schools necessarily employ a broad range of strategies that fit their specific student needs, championing diverse frameworks. Therefore, it is also important to train educators and staff in recognizing symptoms resulting from traumatic experiences and how they may manifest in ways often misperceived as manipulative or rebellious actions. Overall, the adoption of a trauma-informed approach is holistic and school-wide, recognizing that school staff as a whole need to be informed of trauma's effects on individual learning, behavior, and memory systems. Thus, this research focuses on how schools can ease the adoption of a trauma-informed approach and sustain it over time [11, 12].

### **Implementing Trauma-Informed Strategies in the Classroom**

Children exposed to trauma exhibit various behaviors and emotions that disrupt their school experience. They carry their home life into the classroom, necessitating that teachers and staff recognize and address their emotional states. Unfortunately, there is a lack of adequate resources, training, and support for creating trauma-sensitive environments, especially in urban areas where many children face violence and

neglect. Teachers struggle with the instability of these children's backgrounds and their limited coping mechanisms. Five effective strategies for trauma-sensitive classrooms include: (1) building strong relationships; (2) understanding trauma's impact; (3) creating a calming classroom environment; (4) teaching through differentiation; and (5) keeping students engaged in lessons. Each strategy facilitates support for traumatized children without relying on special education teachers or psychologists. Strong relationships are vital for classroom success; they foster an environment where children feel secure, enabling them to learn and grow. Parents of at-risk children may avoid school involvement due to fears of confrontation or feeling inadequate in the presence of teachers. This can lead to an imbalance where children are expected to take on parenting roles. Through persistent efforts and simple strategies, parents and schools can transition from adversaries to allies, contributing to a supportive learning atmosphere. Although challenging, these efforts ultimately validate the teaching profession and establish a foundation for optimal learning for these children and their families [13, 14].

### **Supporting Families and Communities**

Create a community that plays an active role in your school. Collaborate with families and community partners to support students, increase awareness of trauma, and work together to assess the needs of students and families. Partnering with community organizations can help to provide support services at school. Community partners, including social workers, psychologists, and social service organizations, can be included in schools to provide students with counseling and support services. This can help not only to support students but also to support their families. Community members can also help to ensure that staff are aware of what options are available to families outside of school. Family engagement is crucial in creating trauma-informed schools. Families who become involved in the school community can provide insight into what is going on in the community and at home. This information can help staff support the students at school. Adverse childhood experiences are not limited to school. It is necessary to ensure that the school and community work together so that teachers are fully aware of the students' experiences. Another factor in dealing with trauma in students is ensuring that students can be successful regardless of attendance. A majority of students cannot fully attend classes due to other needs. It is important to ensure that these students are aware that there are adults who care about their success and are willing to support them. Regular communication between home and school can help keep students engaged in their work and support programming for those needs that remove students from school. Work with families to ensure they are aware of the resources available to support them. Partner with community agencies and organizations to bring needed resources to families. Meetings to ensure families are aware of which community partners are available to support them can help build a support network for families. Providing communication between the school and community organizations can ensure that families know who to contact to receive support as needed. Schools that support students and work with families to provide support are better suited to help students succeed in school [15, 16].

### **Monitoring and Evaluating Trauma-Informed Practices**

Monitoring efforts are often done through self-report or observer checklists, but can also include informal feedback through community meetings, focus groups, or interviews. Also, be sure to pay attention to what students are saying, as they can often tell you best when the school is improving or degrading in various ways. Monitor Outside of Your School Sometimes, it is beneficial to know what others are seeing in your school's practices. Inviting other district leaders, administrators, or outside professionals to visit your schools and build a report card or audit of the schools in question can provide useful feedback. These audits can also serve the dual purpose of helping to solidify and build strong relationships both within and outside the school. Plan for Evaluation As a way to ensure the teachers see results from the school's efforts to become more trauma-informed, the following refined evaluation is offered, each part of which is discussed in further detail regarding common practices for implementation and evaluation plans. Audit Existing Data: Start by looking at your school's existing data and good education practices. Make sure to qualify everything as best you can and be sure to involve a diverse group of stakeholders throughout all steps: designing the evaluation, reading and summarizing what the database says, and interpreting the analysis. Read about Implementation Review, what others in the field are doing with regards to implementation, and review supportive, consistent practices that build on school strengths based on the prior data audit of schools. Create a list of what practices schools intend to adopt. For any practice or strategy, you cannot have a conversation about it without thinking of the working conditions and the strengths and resources needed for the teachers to adopt it in their settings [17, 18].

### Case Studies of Successful Implementation

A qualitative research study investigated trauma's effects on students and the implementation of Trauma-Informed Care (TIC) at three alternative public schools in greater Boston, Massachusetts. These schools were chosen due to their high populations of students facing disciplinary and emotional challenges linked to trauma. Each case study focused on one school. Interviews with principals, teachers, and staff revealed changes in interactions with students and the overall school environment due to TIC practices. While all schools adopted TIC, implementation varied based on staff knowledge, schedules, and resources. Unique solutions arose to navigate TIC's complexities. Case A involved a senior high school for grades 10-12 serving both typical and At-Risk students. Staff training initiated through the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative included foundational awareness events and revisiting TIC frameworks. Various faculty and staff committees focused on improving trauma response and fostering a school-wide effort. The TIC Rearmor Team, Parent-Teacher Outreach Committee, and Researcher Committee are staff-initiated groups. Findings indicated that TIC practices deeply impacted classroom management, enhancing teachers' understanding of students' anxious behaviors and fostering self-reflection. Case B included a senior high school for grades 11-12, where TIC was central to the principal's agenda. This school showed greater capacity for aligning with TIC compared to others. Significant funding supported staff development in TIC practices. Despite advancements, staff felt a lack of clarity around actionable practices. One staff member expressed uncertainty regarding community definitions of trauma-informed approaches. Instead of feeling adverse, staff noted a disconnect between addressing trauma and implementing safety systems. Case C, a senior high school for grades 11-12, primarily accepted students with disciplinary and attendance issues, but had fewer students with special needs than other districts. Faculty training in TIC was minimal, resulting in a disconnection from trauma-focused attention. Teachers reported less guilt regarding their pedagogy, observing that students were often overlooked or appeared unaffected. One teacher noted a distinct range of behaviors among students classified as special education or those acting out [19, 20].

### Challenges in Creating Trauma-Informed Schools

To foster a culturally sensitive, trauma-informed classroom, teachers who work with children living in adverse situations must examine their own biases, preconceptions, and multiple roles. Children who experience trauma at home follow their pathways to school. Many who arrive at the classroom door have deep emotional scars that prohibit them from engaging in learning. They cannot actually perform well unless their school's teachers and staff are attuned to the conditions they live in and the emotional states they bring to school. Many of these children live with violence, neglect, and abuse. Teachers with a trauma-sensitive pedagogy skillfully employ strategies that support the individual learning needs of all children and actively engage traumatized students in the daily lessons. Teachers do not focus on fix-it types of strategies. Rather, work in a trauma-sensitive school is intense every day. Each moment of a school day is filled with observations of individual children's well-being and behavior regarding classroom norms. Five trauma-informed strategies work well in guiding children in a culturally aware environment and routine to help traumatized children arrive ready to learn and engage in school success: (1) Building strong relationships; (2) Understanding children living with trauma; (3) Creating a structured, calming learning environment; (4) Teaching whole through differentiation; and (5) Engaging children in daily lessons. Building strong relationships creates a supportive learning environment. The teacher-student relationship is crucial in the classroom. Students thrive when they feel a genuine interest in their lives, a sense of validation for who they are as human beings today, and their potential to be productive citizens tomorrow. Fostering positive and trusting relationships with at-risk students helps build a sense of belonging to a supportive classroom community. The essence of a community with a shared sense of belonging is a supportive environment where students can feel safe [21, 22].

### Future Directions in Trauma-Informed Education

During the past decade, the trauma-informed movement has gained significant traction in education. Given the increasing number of children exposed to trauma in our society, it is becoming clearer that educators must play a major role in addressing youth trauma in the school environment. As schools attempt to develop more trauma-informed systems, it is imperative to consider the trajectory of the trauma-informed education movement thus far, as well as future directions. Implementation of trauma-informed schools. Trauma-informed care has existed for over a decade in educational contexts, focusing on interactions within the classroom environment. More recent research has led to the development of trauma-informed systems frameworks that encompass all levels of the education system, from classroom practices to educational policy. These initiatives align with an expanding body of trauma research that

describes how exposure to trauma impairs brain development, interferes with emotional regulation, and leads to behavioral problems. This knowledge is crucial for developing effective systems for trauma-informed schools. Current knowledge gaps. Despite the more comprehensive frameworks for trauma-informed schools, guidance on how to achieve system change at the organizational level is scarce. The research that does exist on this topic has yet to be integrated into a cohesive understanding of what this system change might look like in educational contexts. This knowledge is critical for helping researchers, educators, and policymakers understand how to develop trauma-informed systems that support school personnel in their efforts to implement trauma-informed practices. Following an overview of the development of trauma-informed schools, a framework for trauma-informed systems is presented, along with suggestions of key research questions that still need to be explored [23, 24, 25].

### CONCLUSION

Creating trauma-informed schools is both an urgent necessity and a complex challenge that requires a whole-school commitment. While trauma-informed frameworks have gained popularity, the key to their effectiveness lies in their practical application within the classroom, where relationships, safety, and structure form the foundation for healing and learning. Teachers are central agents of change and must be equipped with specific, actionable strategies to support traumatized students. At the same time, institutional support through staff training, community engagement, and regular evaluation ensures that trauma-informed practices are not episodic but embedded in school culture. Successful implementation demands alignment between staff awareness, administrative leadership, and external partnerships. This paper calls for systemic integration of trauma-informed care into educational policies and school improvement plans, thus ensuring that all children, regardless of background, have the opportunity to thrive academically, emotionally, and socially within a safe and supportive school environment.

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