School-Wide Trauma Awareness and the Impact on the Relational Health of a School Climate

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Theoretical Framework

This research is aligned with the humanist theory of education and the interpretivist paradigm.

> *I'm here for you. We can grow together.*

> *You are valuable to our community just as you are.*

> *How can I help you? What do you need?*

Phrases that may be heard in a trauma-aware school.

Humanism

➢ Humanism prioritizes student-centered learning, student well-being, a belief in the individual's capacity for change, a holistic approach to learning, and a nurturing school environment (Kumari, 2024).

➢ Carl Rogers (1975) emphasizes the need for empathy in relationships for growth to occur.

➢ Nel Noddings (2005) notes the demand for schools to be responsive to the needs of students and families and the necessity of uncovering the history of these needs.

Interpretivist Paradigm

➢ The interpretivist paradigm "assumes that reality is socially constructed and best understood through participants' perspectives" (Thompson Rivers University, 2026, para. 5).

➢ Schools should be a place where students are individually seen and can develop regulatory skills (Van der Kolk, 2014).

Research Topic and Question

"About 6 in 10 individuals reported experiencing some type of child maltreatment before they were 15 years old" (Government of Canada, 2023, para. 3).

➢ **Research Question**: How does a K-12 school-wide understanding of trauma affect the relational health of a school climate?
  ➢ Relational health is determined by a sense of belonging, trust, and strong, positive connections.

➢ **The Significance**: The prevalence of trauma is evident, with unacceptably long wait times for mental health services (Raising Canada, 2025).
  ➢ Trauma is an event, or events, that are perceived as life-threatening or harmful to an individual, having an enduring influence on their well-being and functionality (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, n.d.).
  ➢ Schools and teachers are in a unique position to combat this problem and help students gain resilience (Miller & Berger, 2022) by addressing trauma and its impacts through embracing a universal approach to support all stakeholders.

➢ **The Context**: Relevant literature from all countries was considered for the K-12 context, as although context is crucial and sources of trauma differ from place to place, the impact of trauma is significant and widespread (Phifer & Hull, 2016)

➢ **Thesis Statement**: A school-wide understanding of trauma and its impact on behaviour positively impacts a school's relational climate. This impact is grown through valuing stakeholders, prioritizing well-being, ensuring context-specific interventions, avoiding causing further trauma, and maintaining a strengths-based, holistic lens.

Literature Review

I noted five main recurring themes in the literature that highlight the mutual relationship between trauma-awareness and school relational health.

The Need for Stakeholder Collaboration

➢ Collaboration with parents can build trust (Perry & Daniels, 2016) and help teachers better understand their students' strengths and interests (Miller & Berger, 2022).

➢ Students are empowered when included in the planning and implementation of trauma-informed practice (NCTSN, 2017), and misunderstanding their specific needs can be avoided (Townsend et al., 2020; Watson & Astor, 2025).

➢ Collaboration amongst teachers develops a mindset of shared responsibility for students, which strengthens relationships (Giboney Wall, 2021) and offers opportunities to exchange ideas (Puchner & Markowitz, 2023).

Prioritizing All Stakeholders' Well-Being

➢ "Student challenging behaviour can have a detrimental effect on teacher wellbeing" (Ruttledge, 2022, p. 238).

➢ Students who are taught resiliency and regulatory skills have an easier time communicating in effective ways (Brunzell & Hull, 2019), which leads to improved relationships, including between youth and their parents (McConnico et al., 2016).

➢ Administrators and staff must prioritize self-care (Wassink – de Stigter et al., 2022) because of the risk of vicarious traumatization (Cavanaugh, 2016).

A visual representation of the five recurring themes from the literature.

Avoiding Further Harm/Re-Traumatization

➢ By understanding the challenges that trauma-affected children face, schools can take a compassionate stance in dealing with behaviours (Downey & Greco, 2023).

➢ Misalignment in policies, procedures, and practice can lead to ineffective and damaging responses to students' needs (Chafouleas et al., 2021).

Maintaining a Strengths-Based, Holistic Lens

➢ Educators must see behavior as communicating a need (McConnico et al., 2016) and believe that students are doing the best they are capable of (Downey & Greco, 2023).

➢ There is a risk for school staff to take an approach with a deficit focus (Brunzell et al., 2016) when students' natural sources of strength and resilience should be recognized (Chafouleas et al., 2021).

➢ Students deserve relationships with others who believe in them and support them (Roffey, 2016), celebrating all progress, no matter how small (Brunzell et al., 2019; Cavanaugh, 2016; Wassink - de Stigter et al., 2022).

Context-Specific Planning and Implementation

➢ Schools can become more considerate, "having increased awareness of the ecosystemic factors at play for individual students and across the school community" (Ruttledge, 2022, p. 250).

➢ Close communication with students and families helps increase cultural knowledge (Cavanaugh, 2016).

Recommendations

The following recommendations are based on my findings from the literature, while considering sustainability and feasibility for schools.

1 **Strategic Hiring**

➢ Buy-in from all staff is important to develop shared responsibility (Ruttledge, 2022).

➢ Prospective employees should show interest in learning about trauma-informed practice (Ballin, 2022).

Practical Strategies: Administrators should incorporate an openness to collaboration, trauma-informed practice, and growth in job postings and interviews.

2 **Stakeholder Education**

➢ Trauma education in pre-service training is lacking (Miller & Berger, 2022; Phifer & Hull, 2016).

➢ All stakeholders should be provided with the opportunity to better understand trauma and its impacts (Phifer & Hull, 2016).

Practical Strategies: Schools can develop a shared language amongst school staff (Ballin, 2022), teach regulation strategies weekly, and host parent educational events with multiple dates, times, and childcare provided. Administrators can schedule specific training for staff during staff meetings and in-service days.

3 **Reflective Practice for School Staff**

➢ Teachers need to be able to build supportive relationships with colleagues (Butler & Sultana, 2025).

➢ Educators require opportunities to develop a self-reflective practice (O'Toole & Dobutowitsch, 2023; Ruttledge, 2022).

Practical Strategies: Administrators would benefit from working with teachers to understand how they prefer to develop this practice and build supportive collegial relationships, and then resource accordingly.

Conclusion

Schools and school districts must embrace "their role in mitigating the deleterious ramifications of toxic stress on child development" (Downey & Greco, 2023, p. 3). Schools are tasked with adapting the environment to meet students' needs, not the other way around (Ballin, 2022).

The relational health of a school climate will be improved by collaborating with and educating all stakeholders, prioritizing their well-being, and avoiding further harm, all while honouring their students' specific contexts and adjusting as new trauma science arises.

References