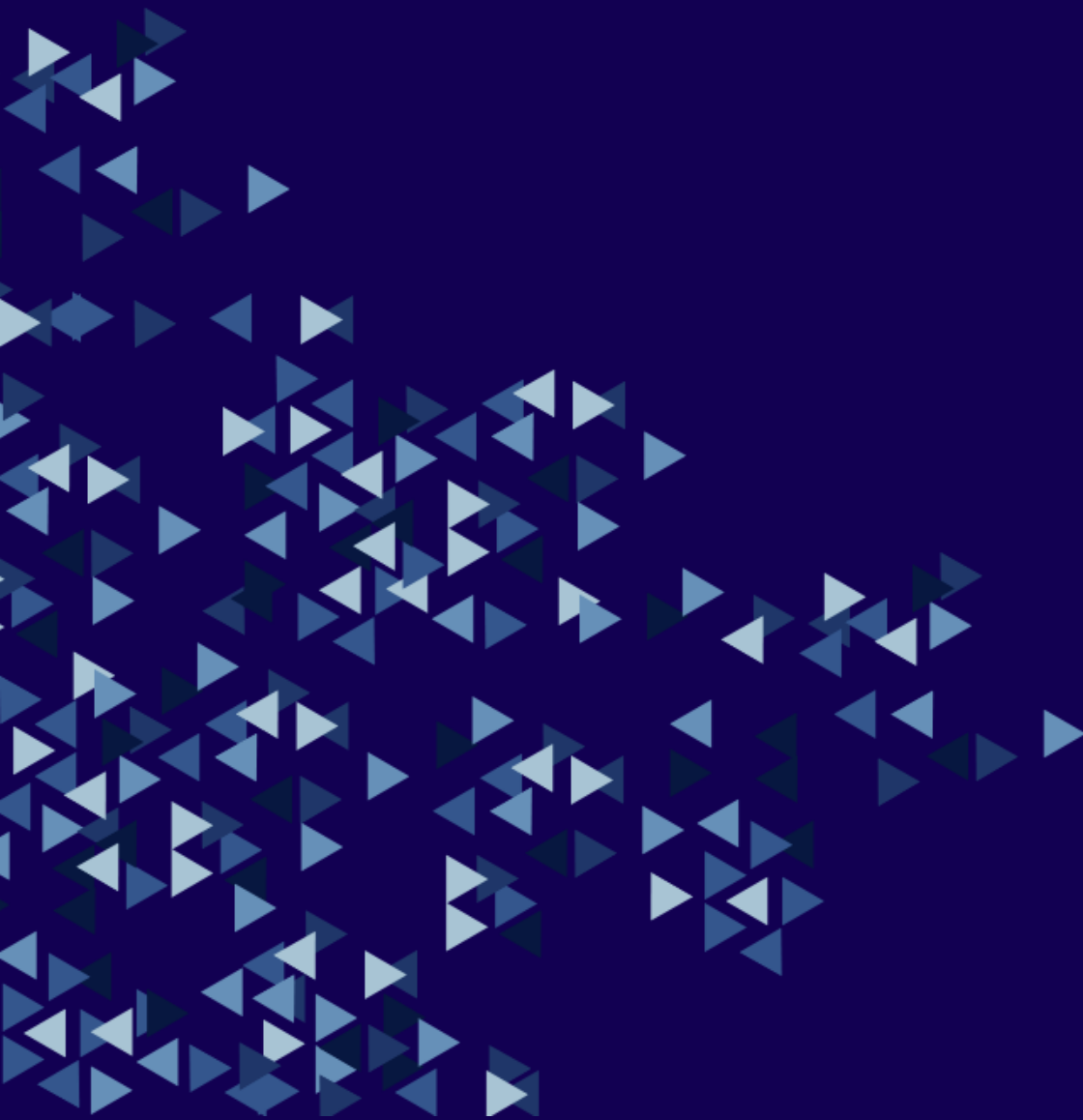


DECLARATION

for a Trauma-Informed Education Workforce in Australia

Howard, J., Brown, M., Cacciattolo, M., Donovan, S., Hobbs, C., Lang, K.,
L'Estrange, L., Southall, A., Spooner-Lane, R., and Steindl, E.





DECLARATION (for a)

TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION WORKFORCE in AUSTRALIA

This Declaration is an output of the biennial Trauma -Aware Education Conference and the collective effort of teams of education leaders and university leaders across Australia who are thought leaders in trauma-informed education.


The Declaration is published on the <https://trauma-aware.education/> website where organisations and individuals “sign” to acknowledge their support for the contents of the Declaration (see Appendix).

An additional background paper is provided for your reference.

We the undersigned acknowledge that trauma is manifesting in the lives of children and young people throughout Australia, as a growing and costly national problem that is urgently requiring an informed national solution. As educators, researchers, leaders of organisations, and concerned citizens, we declare that primary and secondary schools, early childhood education and care services, and alternative education provisions are critically positioned to contribute towards this national solution, due to the relational and learning environments they provide and the amount of time that young learners spend in these environments.

At such a time in history, where child maltreatment, domestic and family violence, youth crime, youth mental ill-health, international war and conflict, refugee trauma, natural disasters, and other concerning societal issues affecting children and young people are increasing in frequency and impact, it is timely for a systemic approach to supporting and educating trauma-impacted young Australians.

We acknowledge that educating and supporting trauma-impacted children and young people can be challenging. Evidence from the fields of neuroscience, education, public health, psychology, and other research explains how childhood trauma can impact the development, structure, and functioning of developing brains and nervous systems (Panuccio et al., 2022; Perry & Azad, 1999; Tucci et al., 2019; van der Kolk, 2007, 2015). Consequently, this explains why young learners behave in the way that they do and face the challenges that they face, both within and outside of education



settings. This research explains that with a consistent trauma-informed response over time, this impact can be minimised or even alleviated for impacted children and young people.

We acknowledge that Federal and State/Territory governments identify the management of student behaviour and inclusion as vital and ongoing priorities in Australia. However, we declare that without a clear understanding of the impact of trauma and the means to address this impact, schools and early childhood education and care services will continue to struggle with the challenging behaviours and other concerns of significant numbers of trauma-impacted learners.


Despite the rapidly growing interest of Australian educators, education sites, and education systems, the implementation of trauma-informed approaches within education can lack consistent, systemic governance and support. Without this systemic support, trauma-informed education in Australian states and territories is at risk of becoming low in quality, inequitably distributed, and unsustainable.

Australia is a global leader in Trauma-Aware Education. However, we declare our concern that without a consistently well-prepared, well-trained, and well-supported workforce, and trauma-informed structures, policies, and systems, we will continue to see:

- unacceptably high rates of suspension, exclusion, truancy, and disengagement of this vulnerable and often marginalised group of young Australians.
- increasingly concerning impacts on the personal and professional wellbeing, recruitment, and retention of teachers, education support personnel, and education leaders.

So, we the undersigned invite Federal, State, and Territory Education Ministers to consider the following proposed initiatives to make trauma-informed education available, consistent, and sustainable throughout Australia.

1. Australian universities delivering **Initial Teacher Education** programs to include quality learning for **all pre-service teachers**, that explains the impacts of childhood trauma and prepares all graduates for trauma-informed approaches to teaching and supporting impacted children and young people.
- **Universities, TAFE colleges, and other associated training organisations** to provide quality learning opportunities regarding trauma-informed education **for all pre-service early childhood educators, teacher-aides/teacher assistants, youth workers, school counsellors, school-based police officers and nurses, and other support personnel** who will be working with children and young people in services and educational settings.
2. **Education Departments and Authorities** in each state and territory to include **central teams** tasked with delivering **workforce training and supported implementation strategies** for trauma-informed education in all education sites (note: this is already established in some states).

- 
3. **Governments, Education Departments, and Authorities to fund and support state/territory strategies** to ensure all education leaders are trauma-informed. This could include on-line modules designed by specialists that are included in mandatory training for leaders in education systems and sites.
 4. **Governments, Education Departments, and Authorities to fund and support state/territory strategies** to recruit and provide **dedicated positions** for specialist educators to deliver quality training to all education sites and to support these sites to work in trauma-informed ways.
 5. **AITSL and ACECQA** to ensure trauma-informed education is embedded within the **Australian Professional Standards for Teachers and School Leaders** and the **National Quality Framework** and associated resources.
 6. **Education Departments and Authorities, and universities to collaborate to support development and delivery of the above recommended strategies.**

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss this Declaration and the recommendations with Federal, State, and Territory Education Ministers and leaders of Education Departments and Authorities throughout our country.



Lead Author

Associate Professor Judith Howard

Faculty of Creative Industries, Education & Social Justice, School of Education
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland 4000

E: ja.howard@qut.edu.au

Co-Authors and Contributors (Alphabetical Order)

Dr Meegan Brown

Faculty of Creative Industries, Education & Social Justice, School of Education
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland 4000

E: meegan.brown@qut.edu.au

Associate Professor Marcelle Cacciattolo

Associate Director (Research Training), Institute for Sustainable Industries and Liveable Cities
Victoria University Research, Victoria University

E: marcelle.cacciattolo@vu.edu.au

Samantha Donovan

School Supervisor, South East Region, QLD Department of Education

E: Samantha.Donovan@qed.qld.gov.edu.au

Dr Carmel Hobbs

Acting Director Trauma Informed Pedagogies Lab
University of Tasmania

E: carmel.hobbs@utas.edu.au

Kristy Lang

Manager, Strategic Projects, Child Wellbeing & Mental Health Services
Teaching, Learning and Student Wellbeing, NSW Department of Education

E: kristy.lang5@det.nsw.edu.au

Dr Lyra L'Estrange

Faculty of Creative Industries, Education & Social Justice, School of Education
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland 4000

E: lyra.lestrange@qut.edu.au

Dr Anne Southall

Senior Lecturer, Inclusion/Trauma
School of Education
La Trobe University, Bundoora, Victoria 3086

E: a.southall@latrobe.edu.au

Associate Professor Rebecca Spooner-Lane


Faculty of Creative Industries, Education & Social Justice, School of Education
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland 4000

E: rs.spooner@qut.edu.au

Dr Emma-Lee Steindl

Faculty of Creative Industries, Education & Social Justice, School of Education
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Queensland 4000

E: em.steindl@qut.edu.au



Trauma-informed knowledge and practice - a critical and timely move forward for Australian education sites and systems:

A background paper

Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Overview | 6 |
| Concerns with student behaviour | 7 |
| Concerns with wellbeing, and recruitment and retention of educators..... | 8 |
| Concerns with the prevalence of childhood trauma..... | 9 |
| Concerns with longer-term impacts of complex trauma | 11 |
| Concerns with the intergenerational impacts of complex trauma | 12 |
| Concerns with the societal costs of unresolved trauma | 13 |
| Concerns with Alternative Education Provision | 14 |
| Trauma-informed education leadership is vital | 15 |
| Systemic structure for trauma-informed education is vital. | 16 |
| The Importance of Initial Teacher Education | 19 |
| Conclusion..... | 20 |
| References..... | 22 |



Overview


How trauma is manifesting in the lives of children and young people throughout Australia, is a growing, costly, and extremely concerning national problem that is urgently requiring an informed national solution. Schools and early childhood education programs are critically positioned to contribute towards this national solution, due to the relational and learning environments they can offer and the amount of time that young learners spend in these environments. At such a time in history, where child maltreatment, domestic and family violence, youth crime, youth mental ill-health, international war and conflict, refugee trauma, natural disasters, and other concerning societal issues are increasing in frequency and impact, it is timely for a systemic, informed, consistent, and equitable approach to supporting and educating trauma-impacted young Australians in schools and early childhood education programs.

We gratefully acknowledge that Federal and State/Territory governments identify the management of student behaviour and inclusion as vital and ongoing priorities in Australia (Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment 2023, 2024). However, we declare that without a clear understanding of the impact of trauma and the means to address this impact, schools and early childhood education and care services will continue to struggle with the challenging behaviours and other concerns of significant numbers of trauma-impacted learners.

Responding in a trauma-informed manner does not mean that educators need to do more, or that they need to take on the work of therapists. Rather it means they need to be trauma-informed and supported to work in trauma-informed ways with children and young people.

- **Being trauma-informed** means that educators are given access to the important information about what complex trauma is, and how it can impact on the nervous systems, behaviours, lives, and education experiences of young learners.
- **Working in a trauma-informed way** means that educators and education sites and systems draw from what is known and recommended to address the impacts of complex trauma and are supported to embed this within their usual relational and educational work, student support processes, and education policies.

However, despite the growing interest of Australian educators, the implementation of trauma-informed approaches to education in Australia can lack consistent, systemic governance and support. Without this systemic support, trauma-informed activity in education sites is at risk of becoming low in quality and unsustainable. This can mostly be due to a lack of quality professional development



and training for education leaders and staff and a lack of sufficient support for implementation of recommended trauma-informed processes.

Concerns with student behaviour

It is becoming increasingly clear that some of the more persistent behaviour challenges faced by education sites are now being explained through a growing understanding of how trauma can impact the development and functioning of children and young people. It is also quite clear that many education sites and systems across Australia continue to struggle with managing the challenging needs and behaviours of trauma-impacted children and young people in a manner that does not involve suspension, exclusion, and other exclusionary, disciplinary practices, particularly when policies direct these consequences. This is despite education sites being staffed by learner-focussed practitioners and the field of education increasingly adopting admirable, often whole-site, practices emphasising inclusive education and positive behaviour support. Unfortunately, the more traditional approaches to behaviour management that draw from reward-consequence paradigms and that are informed by behaviourist methodologies do not work well and can escalate problematic behaviours among trauma-impacted children and young people. This is mostly because they do not address the influential, neurobiological and mental health impacts of living with the impacts of this type of harm (Howard, 2022; Hunt, 2017; Jimenez, 2016).

Irrefutable and growing evidence from neuroscience has explained the impact of childhood trauma on the structure and functioning of developing brains and entire nervous systems which, in turn, explains why these young children and young people behave in the way that they do, and face the challenges that they face (Brunzell et al., 2016; Craig, 2016; Howard, 2022). This scientific information provides clear guidance on what these children and young people need to mitigate the impacts of trauma, so that there can be a lessening or even an elimination of current and future concerns with their behaviours, education, and life outcomes.

Due to the impact on developing nervous systems, children and young people who have lived through complex trauma (particularly if this harm is from those who should be loving, nurturing, and protecting them), can experience significant difficulties as they traverse through early childhood education and schooling.

- They can experience a general lack of capacity to **feel safe in places and with people**.
- They can experience a lack of capacity to read and respond accurately and effectively to social cues, which can then **impact on relationships**.

- They can experience extreme **difficulty with emotional regulation**.

Experiencing such challenges with perceiving safety, with relationships, and with emotional regulation can lead to wide-ranging challenges as young learners attempt to deal with their social worlds within, and outside school. Neuroscience has explained that complex childhood trauma can leave young victims very vulnerable to:

- **hyperarousal** (known as the “fight”, “flight” response), and/or
- **hypoarousal** (known as the “freeze” response) (Seigel, 2020).

Neuroscience has also explained that when in these states, the capacity for emotional regulation and for learning can be significantly impaired. Also, the behaviours that can result can lead to these young learners being very vulnerable to punitive disciplinary responses (including suspension and exclusion) and disengagement (amongst other concerns) (King, 2016; Sanders et al., 2023)

A trauma-informed education response aims to help young learners perceive safety, relate adaptively with adults and peers, and become increasingly proficient with emotional self-regulation.

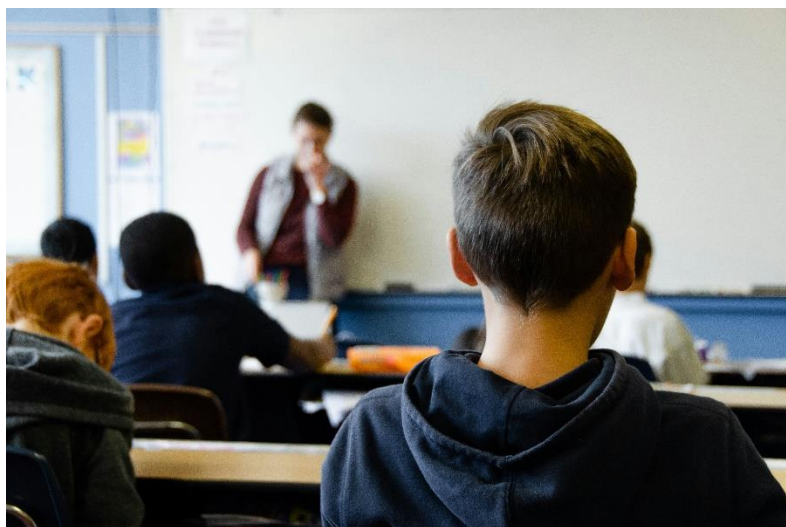


Photo by [Taylor Flowe](#) on [Unsplash](#)

Concerns with wellbeing, and recruitment and retention of educators

It is critical to acknowledge that the personal and professional wellbeing of Australian educators and education leaders can be impacted when working with trauma-impacted children and young people without adequate support (Alisic, 2012; Luthar & Mendes, 2020). Increasingly, we are also becoming aware of the concerning impacts on the recruitment and retention of teachers, education support personnel, and education leaders. Valuing and upholding the personal and professional well-being of

the education workforce is a vital component of a trauma-informed approach in education sites and systems. Indeed, recent research in Australia is suggesting that mitigating secondary and vicarious trauma and shifts in professional identity as well supporting ongoing relationship building with traumatised students requires systematic and proactive professional supervision for educators, similar to the support offered for allied health professionals (Gardner et al., 2022; Southall et al., 2022, 2023). To educate, support, and care for trauma-impacted children and young people, we need to educate, support, and care for the education workforce. Doing this in a trauma-informed manner where safe environments are cultivated for young learners and education staff to thrive, is highly recommended.


A trauma-informed education response aims to inform and equip pre-service and practicing educators and education leaders with knowledge and skill to work effectively with trauma-impacted learners, in a way that is protective of their own personal and professional well-being.

Concerns with the prevalence of childhood trauma

We know that the numbers of trauma-impacted people (including children and young people) in Australia are certainly not small, and the concerns that they face (and perhaps “cause”) are certainly not insignificant. Countries all over the world are increasingly collecting prevalence data to provide a picture of the pervasiveness of childhood trauma and the importance of addressing the harm associated with this trauma (Felitti et al., 1998; Haslam et al., 2023; Pham et al., 2021; Subramaniam et al., 2020; Tanyu et al., 2020). These findings provide a picture of the pervasiveness of childhood trauma and the importance of addressing the harm associated with this trauma world-wide.

Table 1:

| The proportion of Australians (aged 16 years and older), who have experienced maltreatment before the age of 18 include: | The proportion of younger people (aged 16 – 24 years) who have experienced child maltreatment include: |
|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 32% have experienced physical abuse • 28.5% have experienced sexual abuse • 30.9% have experienced emotional abuse • 8.9% have experienced neglect • 39.6% have been exposed to domestic and family violence. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 28.2% have experienced physical abuse • 25.7% have experienced sexual abuse • 34.6% have experienced emotional abuse • 10.3% have experienced neglect • 43.8% have been exposed to domestic and family violence. |



Based on the findings of the recent Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS, 2023, <https://www.acms.au/>; Haslam et al., 2023), we have strong evidence that child maltreatment in Australia is unfortunately common and that no social, economic, or cultural group is immune.

It is important to note that these figures are likely to be underestimated due to the taboo and stigma surrounding child maltreatment. This large, groundbreaking study also found that if this type of trauma was not resolved, impacts can persist over an individual's life course. People who have been exposed to adverse childhood experiences are more likely to engage in health risky behaviours and experience mental health disorders and have much greater utilisation of health services for diagnoses such as diabetes, cancers, and sexually transmitted diseases (ACMS, 2023; Felitti et al., 1998; Tanyu et al., 2020).

The Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (aihw.gov.au) collects annual data on children who receive child protection services which also contributes to our understanding of the prevalence. From these data we know that (e.g. across 2021-2022), approximately one in every 32 Australian children (aged 0 to 17 years) received child protection services designed to *“support vulnerable children who have been or are at risk of being, abused, neglected or otherwise harmed, or whose parents are unable to provide adequate care or protection”* (AIHW, 2023). Unfortunately, this prevalence tends to be maintained, or more often increases each year.

- Of real concern are the disparities revealed by AIHW data each year. Clearly, those who are most impacted by child protection measures tend to come from marginalised and disadvantaged communities.
- Marginalised and disadvantaged people, families, and communities are more likely to face multifaceted issues, including poverty, homelessness, substance use, and mental health concerns, and many lack access to the necessary supports to address these issues.
- The AIHW have also explored the intersection between child protection data and involvement in youth justice supervision and found that more than half of young people in youth justice supervision in Australia have also received child protection services (AIHW, 2022). Research has also found correlations between childhood trauma and youth crime, and youth crime and school disengagement. Strong links were also identified between childhood trauma and disciplinary exclusion (Novak & Fagan, 2022; Mathews et al., 2023).

- Aside from children identified through child protection services, others continue to suffer from childhood maltreatment without being identified by any system. Additionally, some may now be living in safe contexts but still endure the long-term impacts of trauma and maltreatment.

Substantial numbers of children and young people who have been impacted by child maltreatment are attending education sites across Australia and another worrying proportion have disengaged from education due to their needs and concerns not being adequately addressed at school. A study undertaken in South Australia found that over 90% of staff who engaged in trauma-informed practice training across the state have supported students with experiences of trauma. The likelihood of this occurring was higher in lower SES schools and preschools (Button & Harman-Smith, 2021). For these young Australians to have their education and life needs met in adequate ways, **a trauma-informed approach is vital.**

- Each of these children and young people and each of their educators deserves our best efforts to respond to the research that clearly explains the impact of trauma and provides clear directions for trauma-informed education service delivery in all Australian states and territories.

A trauma-informed education response acknowledges the high prevalence of trauma-impacted children and young people in learning environments across the country and accepts the collective responsibility to address educational and life disadvantage likely to be experienced by these young learners.

Concerns with longer-term impacts of complex trauma

If the impacts of complex trauma are not addressed, we know there are concerning longer-term impacts. One of the more significant and well-known bodies of research that informs trauma-informed responses is the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention “Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) Study” (Felitti et al., 1998). The original version of the much-replicated study examined the long-term impacts of ACEs and was the first of its kind to identify childhood trauma as a costly and global public health issue, rather than merely a social concern (Shalev et al., 2013; Shonkoff & Garner, 2012). This large-scale, medical study found that:

- the more types of ACEs experienced during early life, the more likely individuals are to experience concerning, sometimes debilitating, sometimes fatal, health, mental health, and life impacts.
- ACEs were far more common than previously believed.

- individuals experience ACEs regardless of level of education, socioeconomic status, gender, religion, race, or culture.

Ongoing ACEs research has explored many areas of life experience including physical health and mental health, suicide, employment, income potential, poverty, and substance abuse. Collectively, these studies have identified that addressing the impact of early adversity across the life course is critical if societies and systems are to address many of their health and welfare expenses and concerns (Merrick et al., 2017; Metzler et al., 2017; Petrucci et al., 2019).


The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS, 2023) not only identified the staggering prevalence of child maltreatment in Australia, but also identified that the experience of complex childhood trauma is associated with an extraordinary mental health burden in this country. For example, the study found a significantly higher prevalence of mental health disorders in participants who experienced complex childhood trauma compared to those who had not (48.0% v 21.6%).

- After full adjustment for a range of other factors (age group, sex, socio-economic status, financial hardship in childhood, and current financial strain), those who had experienced complex childhood trauma were almost three times more likely to experience major depressive disorder, generalised anxiety disorder and severe alcohol use disorder and nearly five times more likely to experience post-traumatic stress disorder.
- The study also revealed that experiencing child maltreatment can lead to substantial health risk behaviours with participants who experienced complex trauma being four times more likely to have self-harmed in the previous year, four times more likely to have attempted suicide in the previous year, and six times as likely to be dependent on cannabis. The study also identified that unless the impacts of trauma are resolved, childhood maltreatment has enduring and costly effects throughout the lifespan (ACMS, 2023; Grummit et al., 2024; Pacella et al., 2023).

A trauma-informed education response acknowledges the responsibility of educators, education sites, and education systems to work in informed ways to reduce the likelihood of longer-term impacts on the lives of children and young people who have lived through complex trauma.

Concerns with the intergenerational impacts of complex trauma

The science of epigenetics is adding more depth to what we understand of the transmission of the symptomology resulting from child maltreatment from generation to generation. This is a body of research that explores the microscopic, genetic world of human beings. It explains how positive or negative environmental or life influences (experiences) can affect the structure and functioning (and



therefore expression) of genes (units of hereditary information that provide instructions to our bodies regarding our characteristics and functioning) (Gershon & High, 2015; Jovanović et al., 2023).

- Importantly, childhood trauma can lead to worrying changes to the genetic make-up of children that can have a concerning impact on their capacities and functioning and these changes can be passed on to the next and subsequent generations.
- Just as importantly, the positive experiences that can be readily provided through regular trauma-informed practice and care, have the capacity to change the genetic make-up of children in positive ways and can interrupt the intergenerational transmission of harmful effects.


If viewed through a societal lens, or even through social economics, epigenetics provides evidence that trauma-informed care for trauma-impacted children can provide ethical and efficient ways to resolve the current and future intergenerational impacts of trauma.

- This has implications for all children impacted by trauma, but, as reported by the AIHW, this also has particular implications for First Nations Peoples and their children who have experienced the ongoing impacts of historical and transgenerational trauma (Atkinson, 2002; Darwin, et al., 2023).
- Importantly, there is now growing recognition that the hours, days, weeks, months, and years that children and young people are in education settings, provides a critical opportunity to provide the positive, supportive, and relational activity that can over time and with consistency address these life and potentially intergenerational impacts.

A trauma-informed education response acknowledges the responsibility of educators, education sites, and education systems to work in informed ways to reduce the likelihood of the impacts of complex trauma being transmitted to future generations of children and young people.

Concerns with the societal costs of unresolved trauma

A range of studies from a variety of countries (including Australia) (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014; Grummitt et al., 2021) have examined the economic impact of unresolved complex childhood trauma. These studies have agreed that addressing these impacts will lead to considerable economic benefits to countries and systems, and of course, to life and wellbeing benefits for those who have lived through this type of harm. Addressing the impact of early adversity across the life course is critical, particularly if countries, societies, and systems are to tackle many of their significant health and welfare expenses and concerns. For example, children can exhibit challenging behaviours and even



disengage from schooling (sometimes voluntarily and sometimes not), and this can lead to concerning education and life outcomes and significant society expenses, including those associated with service areas such as health, mental health, welfare, child protection, criminal justice, and housing. In addition, there can be long-term productivity losses as unresolved trauma can lead to victims becoming unemployed or under employed due the life complexities that they face.


A trauma-informed education response acknowledges that all states and territories (including their education systems) should work in trauma-informed, systemic, and aligned ways to reduce the considerable societal costs of unresolved trauma.

Concerns with Alternative Education Provision

Increasingly, alternative education providers across the country are embedding trauma-informed practice that is having a positive impact on the education and life trajectories of students. However, these provisions are also reporting significant and growing waiting lists of students who either have been excluded from mainstream education, or who are living with conditions, concerns, or life circumstances that makes attendance at a mainstream school either very difficult or impossible for them. This can include experience of homelessness, poverty, disability, mental ill-health, bullying, or teen pregnancy or parenting (as examples) and many of these young people are trauma-impacted.

Alternative education provisions differ greatly in each state and territory and are in high demand with long waiting lists. The Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education (AAFIE; 2023) provides a national database of flexible learning options across Australia suggesting that there are over 677 provisions (either separate to or within schools) with the bulk operating in Brisbane, Sydney, and Melbourne and far fewer provisions elsewhere. However, as the AAFIE depend on information that is either publicly available or has been submitted by the program provider, these data may be an underrepresentation of current provisions, and an accurate tally of current enrolments is not clear. However, it is known that one large national provider (Edmund Rice Education) is servicing 41 000 students in 55 provisions with 4500 staff. It is also clear that the number of special assistance schools in the independent school sector doubled between 2014 and 2022 (highlighting the need for these schools) in contrast to an eight percent increase in mainstream independent schools over the same eight-year period (Independent Schools Australia, 2023)

One important goal for trauma-aware education in Australia is to address concerns regarding the overwhelming demand for placements in alternative education throughout Australia, by embedded



quality trauma-informed education more consistently throughout mainstream education. By more effectively meeting the needs of trauma-impacted students in mainstream education settings, there should be less of a demand for these students to move to alternative education.

- However, until this goal is achieved and achieved well, quality, trauma-informed alternative education provision will continue to be needed to enhance educational and life outcomes, for significant numbers of trauma-impacted young people across Australia, who would otherwise be unsuccessful engaging in, or completing their schooling. Indeed, an Australian social return on investment study identified that flexi schools found a \$28 return for every dollar invested (Thomas & Nicholas, 2018).

A trauma-informed education response suggests that quality and consistent trauma-informed practice throughout mainstream education should lessen the significant need for alternative education placements in states and territories. However, it is also acknowledged that until this goal is achieved, the need for adequate places in quality, trauma-informed alternative education provisions will be needed. Therefore, systemic support is imperative to provide a trauma-informed and well-supported alternative education workforce throughout Australia.

Trauma-informed education leadership is vital

Education systems are often large and complex organizations with frequently changing leadership roles and areas of responsibility. They manage competing and regularly shifting agendas and priorities. While ensuring that all new and existing personnel within these systems are trauma-informed is challenging, it is not impossible. Research clearly shows that education leaders unaware of the impacts of complex childhood trauma are much less likely to support trauma-informed practices within their schools or governing organisations. Therefore, a lack of trauma-awareness among educational leaders can be seen as a major barrier to the consistency and quality of implementing and embedding trauma-informed approaches.

- Many dedicated teachers and other professionals within educational settings are diligently working to embed trauma-informed practices. However, when these practitioners operate in environments where education leaders are not trauma-informed, their jobs become challenging. They often feel unsupported, must continually justify their approaches to behaviour management and learner support, and need to advocate constantly for increased trauma-

awareness within their workplace to avoid staff burnout and vicarious trauma, together with balancing the day-to-day responsibilities of their role (Oberg et al., 2023; Southall, 2024).

- Alternatively, in settings where leaders understand and respond to evidence-based theory and science that underpins trauma-informed education, it is much more likely that recommended practice and educational policy reform will be supported and that the benefits of this approach for both learners and educators will be realised.

Embedding mandatory learning regarding trauma-informed education for any new and ongoing education system and education site leaders, could diminish some of these complexities. Also, a systemic approach to trauma-informed education should be quarantined from the impacts of political and leadership change in education sites and systems and in states and territories (Howard et al., 2022).




Photo by LinkedIn Sales Solutions on Unsplash

A trauma-informed education response recognises that trauma-informed leadership is one of the greatest facilitators of this work.

Systemic structure for trauma-informed education is vital.

Leaders in education systems should recognise the importance of investing in and building structures of trauma-informed leadership and expertise throughout their systems. By investing in the development of dedicated roles for interdisciplinary teams of trauma-informed specialists and educators, the likelihood of this work becoming productive and sustainable within their organisations can become realised. A distributed leadership model is recommended.

In simple terms, this could involve establishing dedicated, centralised positions to lead state/territory agendas for trauma-informed education at the system level. These centralised roles could focus on policy and resource development whilst also overseeing the development and support of a specialist workforce. This workforce could then be tasked to provide consistent and quality training and support in trauma-informed education to individual or groups of education sites (schools, early childhood education programs).



There are current and admirable examples of where education departments have established and funded centralised specialist teams and resources to lead state-wide trauma-informed education responses. These teams oversee workforce development strategies and support agendas to build capacity in trauma-informed education in schooling and early childhood education and care across their states. However, there continues to be further work to be done to ensure that this support is available in an equitable way across all education sites and systems, in all states and territories.

Example One: New South Wales

A significant part of the New South Wales Department of Education “*Disability Strategy*” is the provision of a centralised team who oversees the delivery and coordination of workforce development in trauma-informed education. This work commenced with a pilot program in 2019 which involved over 1,000 participants and showed positive outcomes, leading to a broader rollout in subsequent years. <https://education.nsw.gov.au/schooling/school-community/our-disability-strategy/initiatives/trauma-informed-practice-professional-development-pilot> . By 2020, the Department had developed and piloted a foundational course in trauma-informed education with multiple modules, reaching over 2,000 participants. In 2021, the refined “*Trauma-Informed Practice for Improved Learning and Wellbeing*” course was launched, training over 4,138 participants. The Department also developed advanced leadership and specialist courses to further equip staff. By 2022, trauma-informed practice had become integral to the Department's operations, with more than 5,865 staff completing at least one module and additional courses available to support trauma-aware school communities. A discussion guide has also been produced <https://education.nsw.gov.au/about-us/education-data-and-research/cese/publications/practical-guides-for-educators/trauma-informed-practice-discussion-guide>.



Example Two: Tasmania

The Department for Education, Children and Young People (DECYP) has developed a model for supporting students impacted by trauma (<https://www.decyp.tas.gov.au/learning/for-schools-and-educators/supporting-students-impacted-by-trauma/>) and have produced an informed resource to support educators (<https://publicdocumentcentre.education.tas.gov.au/library/Shared%20Documents/Good-Teaching-Trauma-Informed-Practice.pdf>). They also provided free training in trauma-informed practice for education staff in 2023, delivered by Australian Childhood Foundation.

Example Three: South Australia

Since 2018, the South Australian Department for Education has committed to fund and support the Trauma-Informed Practice in Education (TIPIE) initiative. TIPIE provides training, consultancy and implementation support in trauma-informed education to schools and preschools, to develop the capacity of staff to build and lead inclusive and supportive work in education sites and classrooms. Various evidence-based training offerings are made available for individuals, leadership teams, and whole of school/preschool staff. This includes foundational training, training for leadership teams, professional development delivered by expert providers, and scholarships for Graduate Certificate qualifications in trauma-informed education. The initiative is coordinated by a centrally based team in the Department who support schools through an online “*Trauma Learning Community of Practice*”, school case studies, evaluation, mentoring and policy advice.



Example Four: LOOKOUT Education Support Centres in Victoria

LOOKOUT Education Support Centres work with early childhood services, schools, carers, child protection practitioners and out-of-home care services with the aim of improving professional capabilities and educational outcomes for children and young people living in out-of-home care.

They operate within a trauma-informed approach and culturally safe approach to create collaborations with key stakeholders with education being a central focus in a child or young person's care, placement and future. Together LOOKOUT Education Support Centres and their partners have facilitated opportunities for students to participate fully in school life (including camps, excursions and extracurricular activities). Professional development, advocacy, expert advice and support are provided by LOOKOUT Education Support Centres to build the capability of professionals who work with children and young people in care.


In addition, the Queensland Mental Health Commission has developed a **Queensland Trauma Strategy** that will focus on the prevention of trauma, improving the supports provided to people who have experienced trauma, and reducing the long-term impact on individuals and the Queensland community. The development of a trauma strategy is also a recommendation of the Queensland Parliamentary Mental Health Select Committee's Inquiry into the opportunities to improve mental health outcomes for Queenslanders and connects directly with the Personal and Social Capabilities and Health Key Learning Area of the Australian Curriculum v.9. The strategy includes a strong focus on a broad workforce reform agenda across government and non-government organisations, including education systems (<https://info.qmhc.qld.gov.au/queensland-trauma-strategy>).

A trauma-informed education response suggests that a whole-of-system approach holds the most potential to drive positive impact consistently, sustainably over time, across all education sites and for all educators and trauma-impacted learners.

(Howard et al., 2022; QUT & Australian Childhood Foundation, 2021).

The Importance of Initial Teacher Education

Prevention is always the preferred option to address any potential impacts on the personal and professional wellbeing concerns of the education workforce due to working with the diverse needs of the student population, in particular, trauma-impacted learners. This could be achieved by embedding mandatory learning about trauma-informed education, within all initial



teacher education programs in each state and territory. One Australian study found that the perceived knowledge, self-efficacy, and resilience of pre-service teachers related to their working with trauma-affected students, dramatically increased after completing university-delivered learning on trauma-informed education, and this increase was maintained into their early careers (L'Estrange & Howard, 2022). Also, universities and TAFE colleges could provide quality learning opportunities in trauma-informed education for all pre-service teacher-aides/teacher assistants, early childhood educators, youth workers, school counsellors, school-based police officers and nurses, and other support personnel who will be working in schools and early childhood education programs. This preventative approach could limit concerns before they start for early career educators and also minimise the need for later training for practicing educators (DuBois & Mistretta, 2020; Essary et al., 2020; Hobbs et al., 2019; Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2011, 2015; You & Conley, 2015).

Example: Queensland University of Technology

The Queensland University of Technology (QUT) provides core units within the Bachelor of Education (Early Childhood, Primary and Secondary) courses and the Master of Teaching course. The inclusion of this content required substantial advocacy to faculty and response to research, to inform course design during re-accreditation processes. To complement these provisions in Initial Teacher Education, QUT also offers a Graduate Certificate and Master of Education specialisation in Trauma-Aware Education for practising educators.

A trauma-informed education response suggests that all pre-service education programs for people who will be working in education contexts, should embed mandatory learning about trauma-informed education.

Conclusion

The more education systems encompass trauma-informed education as an important aspect of service delivery, the more that individual education sites, education site leaders, educators and other support personnel, and (importantly) trauma-impacted children and young people will benefit. Through an informed, respected, and systemic approach to trauma-informed education throughout Australia, leaders will develop strong capacities to lead both the work, and the people involved. Education systems and sites are complex and ever-changing institutions that do present challenges to a comprehensive and sustained implementation of trauma-informed education. However, this


should not stop us from forging forward to engage in vital conversations and activity that will progress trauma-informed education in all our education sites and systems.





Image by Coco Ratta on [Vecteezy](https://www.vecteezy.com/author/CocoRatta)


References

- Alisic, E. (2012). Teachers' perspectives on providing support to children after trauma: A qualitative study. *School Psychology Quarterly*, 27(1), 51-59.
<https://doi.org/10.1037/a0028590>
- Atkinson, J. (2002). *Trauma trails, recreating song lines: The transgenerational effects of trauma in Indigenous Australia*. Spinifex Press.
- Australian Association for Flexible and Inclusive Education. (2023). *National flexible learning options program database*. <https://aafie.org.au/national-flexible-learning-options-program-database/>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government. (2022). *Young people under youth justice supervision and their interaction with the child protection system 2020-21* [Catalogue Number CSI 29]. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/youth-justice/young-people-under-youth-justice-supervision/summary>
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government. (2024). *Child protection Australia 2021-22*. <https://www.aihw.gov.au/reports/child-protection/child-protection-australia-2021-22/contents/child-protection-system-in-australia>
- Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2016). Trauma-informed positive education: Using positive psychology to strengthen vulnerable students. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 20(1), 63-83. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s40688-015-0070-x>
- Brunzell, T., Waters, L., & Stokes, H. (2021). Trauma-informed teacher wellbeing: Teacher reflections within trauma-informed positive education. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 46(5), 91-107. <https://doi.org/10.14221/ajte.2021v46n5.6>
- Button, E., & Harman-Smith, Y. (2021). *Evaluation of Trauma-Informed Practice in Education Approach*. Child Health, Development, and Education Team, Telethon Kids Institute. Adelaide, South Australia.
https://www.thekids.org.au/contentassets/3ecc1e04e61142e28b96f57c7e8c0525/tipie-final-report_04.03.2022.pdf
- Craig, S. (2016). *Trauma-Sensitive Schools: Learning communities transforming children's lives*, K-5. Teachers College Press.

- 
- Darwin, L., Vervoort, S., Vollert, E., & Blustein, S. (2023). *Intergenerational trauma and mental health*. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare. Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Australian Government. <https://doi.org/10.25816/v8ta-1t17>
- De Bellis, M. D., & Zisk, A. (2014). The Biological Effects of Childhood Trauma. *Child and Adolescent Psychiatric Clinics of North America*, 23(2), 185-222.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chc.2014.01.002>
- Dubois, A.L., & Mistretta, M.A. (2019). *Overcoming Burnout and Compassion Fatigue in Schools: A Guide for Counselors, Administrators, and Educators* (1st ed.). Routledge.
<https://doi.org/10.4324/9781351030021>
- Essary, J. N., Barza, L., & Thurston, R. J. (2020). Secondary Traumatic Stress Among Educators. *Kappa Delta Pi Record*, 56(3), 116–121. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00228958.2020.1770004>
- Felitti, V. J., Anda, R. F., Nordenberg, D., Williamson, D. F., Spitz, A. M., Edwards, V., Koss, M. P., & Marks, J. S. (1998). Relationship of Childhood Abuse and Household Dysfunction to Many of the Leading Causes of Death in Adults: The Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study. *American Journal of Preventive Medicine*, 14(4), 245-258.
[https://doi.org/10.1016/s0749-3797\(98\)00017-8](https://doi.org/10.1016/s0749-3797(98)00017-8)
- Gardner, F., Southall, A. E., & Baxter, L. (2022). Effectively supporting teachers: a peer supervision model using reflective circles. *Teachers and Teaching*, 28(3), 369-383. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13540602.2022.2062727>
- Gershon, N. B., & High, P. C. (2015). Epigenetics and child abuse: Modern-day Darwinism - The miraculous ability of the human genome to adapt, and then adapt again. *American Journal of Medical Genetics. Part C, Seminars in Medical Genetics*, 169C(4), 353–360.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/ajmg.c.31467>
- Grummitt, L. R., Baldwin, J. R., Lafoa'i, J., Keyes, K. M., & Barrett, E. L. (2024). Burden of mental disorders and suicide attributable to childhood maltreatment. *JAMA Psychiatry*, 81(8), 782-788. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapsychiatry.2024.0804>
- Grummitt, L. R., Kreski, N. T., Kim, S. G., Platt, J., Keyes, K. M., & McLaughlin, K. A. (2021). Association of Childhood Adversity with Morbidity and Mortality in US Adults: A Systematic Review. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 175(12), 1269–1278.
<https://doi.org/10.1001/jamapediatrics.2021.2320>

- 
- Haslam, D. M., Lawrence, D. M., Mathews, B., Higgins, D. J., Hunt, A., Scott, J. G., Dunne, M. P., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Finkelhor, D., Pacella, R., Meinck, F., & Malacova, E. (2023). The Australian Child Maltreatment Study (ACMS), a national survey of the prevalence of child maltreatment and its correlates: Methodology. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 218(6), S5–S12. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51869>
- Howard, J. (2022). *Trauma-Aware Education: Essential information and guidance for educators, education sites and education systems*. Australian Academic Press.
- Hobbs, C., Paulsen, D., & Thomas, J. (2019). Trauma-informed practice for pre-service teachers. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.1435>
- Hunt, T. K. A., Slack, K. S., & Berger, L. M. (2017). Adverse childhood experiences and behavioral problems in middle childhood. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 67(5), 391-402.
<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2016.11.005>
- Iacono, T., Landry, O., Garcia-Melgar, A., Spong, J., Hyett, N., Bagley, K., & McKinstry, C. (2023). A systematized review of co-teaching efficacy in enhancing inclusive education for students with disability. *International Journal of Inclusive Education*, 27(13), 1454-1468. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1900423>
- Independent Schools Australia. (2023). *Special assistance schools showcase*. Independent Schools Australia. <https://isa.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/ISA-Special-Assistance-School-Showcase.pdf>
- Jeremy, J., Spandagou, I., & Hinitt, J. (2024). Teacher–therapist collaboration in inclusive primary schools: A scoping review. *Australian Occupational Therapy Journal*, 71(4), 593–611.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/1440-1630.12931>
- Jimenez, M. E., Wade, R., Jr, Lin, Y., Morrow, L. M., & Reichman, N. E. (2016). Adverse Experiences in Early Childhood and Kindergarten Outcomes. *Pediatrics*, 137(2).
<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2015-1839>
- Jovanovic, T., Roberts, A., & Huels, A. (2023). Intergenerational transmission of trauma: A biological perspective. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 36(4), 662-664.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/jts.22938>

- 
- King, H. (2016). The Connection between Personal Traumas and Educational Exclusion in Young People's Lives. *YOUNG*, 24(4), 342-358. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1103308815627752>
- L'Estrange, L., & Howard, J. (2022). Trauma-informed initial teacher education training: A necessary step in a system-wide response to addressing childhood trauma. *Frontiers in Education*, 7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2022.929582>
- Luthar, S. S., & Mendes, S. H. (2020). Trauma-informed schools: Supporting educators as they support the children. *International Journal of School & Educational Psychology*, 8(2), 147–157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21683603.2020.1721385>
- Mathews, B., Papalia, N., Napier, S., Malacova, E., Lawrence, D., Higgins, D. J., Thomas, H., Erskine, H., Meinck, F., Haslam, D., Scott, J., Finkelhor, D., & Pacella, R. (2023). Child maltreatment and criminal justice system involvement in Australia: Findings from a national survey. *Trends and Issues in Crime and Criminal Justice* [Catalogue Number 681]. <https://doi.org/10.52922/ti77215>
- Merrick, M. T., Ports, K. A., Ford, D. C., Afifi, T. O., Gershoff, E. T., & Grogan-Kaylor, A. (2017). Unpacking the impact of adverse childhood experiences on adult mental health. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 69, 10-19. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2017.03.016>
- Metzler, M., Merrick, M. T., Klevens, J., Ports, K. A., & Ford, D. C. (2017). Adverse childhood experiences and life opportunities: Shifting the narrative. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 72, 141–149. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.10.021>
- Novak, A., & Fagan, A. (2022). Expanding Research on the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Examining the Relationships between Suspension, Expulsion, and Recidivism among Justice-Involved Youth. *Crime and Delinquency*, 68(1), 3-27. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00111287219993>
- Oberg, G., Carroll, A., & Macmahon, S. (2023). Compassion fatigue and secondary traumatic stress in teachers: How they contribute to burnout and how they are related to trauma-awareness. *Frontiers in Education*, 8. <https://doi.org/10.3389/feduc.2023.1128618>
- Pacella, R., Nation, A., Mathews, B., Scott, J. G., Higgins, D. J., Haslam, D. M., Dunne, M. P., Finkelhor, D., Meinck, F., Erskine, H. E., Thomas, H. J., Malacova, E., Lawrence, D. M., & Monks, C. (2023). Child maltreatment and health service use: findings of the Australian Child Maltreatment Study. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 218(6), S40–S46. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.51892>



Panuccio, A., Biondo, D., Picerni, E., Genovesi, B., & Laricchiuta, D. (2022). Trauma-Related Internalizing and Externalizing Behaviors in Adolescence: A Bridge between Psychoanalysis and Neuroscience. *Adolescents*, 2(4), 413-423.

<https://doi.org/10.3390/adolescents2040032>

Perry, B. D., & Azad, I. (1999). *Traumatic stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*. Guilford Publications.

Petrucelli, K., Davis, J., & Berman, T. (2019). Adverse childhood experiences and associated health outcomes: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 97.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104127>

Pham, T. S., Qi, H., Chen, D., Chen, H., & Fan, F. (2021). Prevalences of and correlations between childhood trauma and depressive symptoms, anxiety symptoms, and suicidal behavior among institutionalized adolescents in Vietnam. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 115.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2019.104127>

QUT & Australian Childhood Foundation. (2021). *National Guidelines for Trauma-Aware Education*.

[https://eprints.qut.edu.au/207800/1/National Trauma Aware Guidelines web version 2021.pdf](https://eprints.qut.edu.au/207800/1/National_Trauma_Aware_Guidelines_web_version_2021.pdf)

Sanders, J., Joseph-McCatty, A., Massey, M., Swiatek, E., Csiernik, B., & Igor, E. (2023). Exposure to adversity and trauma among students who experience school discipline: A scoping review. *Review of Educational Research*, 93(2), 123-145.

<https://doi.org/10.3102/00346543231203674>


Siegel, D. J. (2020). *The developing mind* (3rd ed.). The Guilford Press.

Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment, Parliament of Australia. (2023). *The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms: Interim Report*.

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000063/toc_pdf/TheissueofincreasingdisruptioninAustralianschoolclassrooms.pdf

Senate Standing Committees on Education and Employment, Parliament of Australia. (2024). *The issue of increasing disruption in Australian school classrooms: Final Report*.

https://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/download/committees/reportsen/RB000298/toc_pdf/TheissueofincreasingdisruptioninAustralianschoolclassrooms.pdf



Shalev, I., Moffitt, T. E., & Caspi, A. (2013). Violence exposure during childhood is associated with telomere erosion: A longitudinal study. *Comprehensive Psychiatry*, 54.

<https://doi.org/10.1038/mp.2012.32>

Shonkoff, J. P., Garner, A. S., Siegel, B. S., ... Wegner, L. M. (2012). The lifelong effects of early childhood adversity and toxic stress. *Pediatrics*, 129(1), e232–e246.

<https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2011-2663>

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2011). Teacher job satisfaction and motivation to leave the teaching profession: Relations with school context, feeling of belonging, and emotional exhaustion. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 27(6), 1029-

1038. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2011.04.001>

Skaalvik, E. M., & Skaalvik, S. (2015). Job Satisfaction, Stress, and Coping Strategies in the Teaching Profession. What Do the Teachers Say? *International Education Studies*, 8, 181-

192. <http://dx.doi.org/10.2466/14.02.PR0.114k14w0>

Southall, A. (2024). The trauma challenge: How teachers experience students with complex trauma. *British Journal of Special Education*, 51(1), 3-14. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8578.12487>


Southall, A. E., Baxter, L. P., & Gardner, F. (2023). Transforming trauma-informed understanding into trauma-informed practice: The Reflective Circle Education Model. *Australian Journal of Education*, 67(1), 62-75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00049441221146555>

Southall, A. E., Gardner, F., & Baxter, L. P. (2022). Educator perspectives on teaching students from traumatic backgrounds and the potential for reflective circles. *The Australian Educational Researcher*, 49(4), 675-689. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13384-021-00455-7>

Subramaniam, M., Abidin, E., Seow, E., Vaingankar, J. A., Shafie, S., Shahwan, S., Lim, M., Fung, D., James, L., Verma, S., & Chong, S. A. (2020). Prevalence, socio-demographic correlates and associations of adverse childhood experiences with mental illnesses: Results from the Singapore Mental Health Study. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 103.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104447>

Tanyu, M., Spier, E., Pulizzi, S., Rooney, M., Sorenson, I., & Fernandez, J. (2020). Improving education outcomes for students who have experienced trauma and/or adversity. *OECD Education Working Papers*, 242. <https://doi.org/10.1787/19939019>

- 
- Thomas, J. & Nicholas, C. (2018). Estimating the economic returns to flexible learning options in Australia – A social return on investment analysis. Townsville: James Cook University.
Available at <https://youthplusinstitute.org.au>
- Tucci, J., Mitchell, J., Tronick, E., Teicher, M. H., Munkbaatar, O., Schore, A. N., Gatwiri, K., Perry, B. D., Kickett, G., & Chandran, S. (2019). *The Handbook of Therapeutic Care for Children: Evidence-Informed Approaches to Working with Traumatized Children and Adolescents in Foster, Kinship and Adoptive Care*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Van der Kolk, B. A. (2007). *Traumatic Stress: The effects of overwhelming experience on mind, body, and society*. Guilford Publications.
- Van der Kolk, B. A. (2015). *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Penguin Books.
- You, S., & Conley, S. (2015). Workplace predictors of secondary school teachers' intention to leave: An exploration of career stages. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 43(4), 561-581. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741143214535741>