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Leading Trauma-Informed Practice in Schools

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ABSTRACT: This article will discuss what it means for leaders in schools often serving communities contending with educational inequity in which many of the students are identified as trauma-affected and how both leaders and schools can move from being trauma-affected to trauma-aware. Leaders and teachers often interpret resistant student behaviour as a 'choice' the student is making to assert themselves in the classroom. However, trauma-aware perspectives prompt both leaders and teachers to reflect on the impacts of trauma on learning, the underlying causes of student behaviour, and then to embed whole-school strategies to support the learning and growth of their students. We will draw on a body of work we have developed and researched over the last five years. From the evidence based on the practice delivery of trauma-informed practice in schools (Stokes & Farrelly, 2019; Stokes et al., 2019; Stokes & Turnbull, 2016), we articulate the issues facing leaders and teachers; and then draw together key strategies that leaders can implement to move their school from being trauma-affected to trauma-aware .

The Need for Trauma-Aware Leadership

Our research is with school leaders (i.e. principals and their leadership teams) who often initially self-report they are crises fatigued (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019; Stokes & Turnbull, 2016). School leaders, particularly in communities contending with systemic educational inequity, require ongoing practice development to effectively provide education of trauma-affected students, many of whom arrive at school with significant unmet learning and social emotional needs. However, the importance of bolstering school leadership practice takes on even greater urgency in the current geopolitical environment of arising uncertainty within communities. Particularly in the Australian context where communities we work in are still recovering from the devastating impacts of bushfires, the significant disruption of COVID-19 to 'school as usual', and the escalating pressures to address systemic racism particularly for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, the role of school leadership has quickly become even more complex beyond

the normal day-to-day crises and triage resulting from students' escalation, resistance and dysregulation.

Trauma-informed perspectives within education offer promising pathways to school leaders and the communities in which they lead (Brunzell, 2019; Stokes & Brunzell, 2019). Trauma-informed practices assist school leaders to become trauma-aware themselves, to establish trauma-informed values within their communities, and to guide their school's practices to understand the impacts of adverse childhood experiences and then proactively guide their teachers towards effective interventions (Brunzell, 2019).

We find that school leadership teams are leading and caring for teachers who are adversely and continuously impacted by vicarious and secondary exposure to childhood trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2018). Antoniou, Ploumpi and Ntalla (2013) suggest up to 25 per cent of teachers attribute their burnout to unsuccessfully contending with disruptive student behaviour and to hopelessness due to school leadership inability to support whole-school positive behaviours. In Australia, up to 50 per cent will leave the profession within five years, and 45 per cent of teachers will leave within 10 years (Willett, Segal, & Walford, 2014). This represents significant challenges for school leaders regarding the retention and sustainability of effective professional practice within their schools.

Pines' (2002) helpful theorising posits that a salient factor leading to teacher burnout and compassion fatigue is experiencing an existential crisis of meaning. That is, when teachers feel their pedagogies have no impact to help struggling students learn, they feel their professional identities diminish and their own professional choices rendered pointless. To address this, school leaders can take numerous pathways to address the wellbeing needs of their teachers (Branand & Nakamura, 2017).

However, our contention is that addressing teacher wellbeing is not enough. While school leaders should certainly consider how their schools can support the wellbeing of teachers, they must place priority on improving pedagogical practice of teachers to increase teacher capacity to teach and to support vulnerable students struggling with resistance, defiance and refusal within the classroom (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016a). This contention is supported by leaders in schools who commented that the reasons they were wanting to implement trauma-informed practice were that:

> Mainstream teaching approaches and pedagogies were failing to meet the needs of significant numbers of students; student populations were confronting diverse and complex challenges; and teachers were confronting significant professional and personal challenges in dealing with the diversity of student need. (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016, p. 18)

A New Approach to Trauma-Informed Teaching and Learning

Along with our colleague Lea Waters, we designed a new conceptual model to intentionally increase a school's pedagogical practice by integrating the arising evidence within two

previously siloed practice areas: trauma-informed pedagogies and wellbeing-informed interventions (also known as positive education) within classrooms. Our model added to extant models of trauma-informed approaches but had an important difference. We found that most recommendations and practice models for trauma-informed teaching are grounded in a deficit perspective. Such approaches first aim to identify self-regulatory, emotional and relational struggles within the student and then adjust learning strategies to the deficiencies or developmental struggles that the student faces (Brunzell, Waters & Stokes, 2015).

In contrast, our model takes a three-tiered approach to learning which is grounded in a strengths-based perspective. We named this conceptual model *trauma-informed positive education* (TIPE) (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016b; Brunzell, Waters & Stokes, 2015). It is predicated on Keyes' (2002) two-factor theory of wellbeing which suggests increasing mental health requires more than reducing deficits in mental health.

Without this dual-continua approach, teachers can be entrenched in a pervasively negative mindset, often leading to the aforementioned existential crises and exiting the profession (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016a). Prior to the creation of TIPE, we witnessed too many teachers giving up on teaching wellbeing strategies because their students had an overwhelming amount of regulatory and relational needs in the classroom. We did not want them to give up on deliberately increasing *what was right* within their students.

The TIPE model (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016b) is a conceptual model based on three developmentally positioned tiers arising from our systematic literature review. Tier 1 recommends increasing self-regulatory abilities in students who quickly escalate due to trauma's negative impacts on managing stress (van der Kolk, 2017). This priority domain recognises that trauma-affected students often struggle with their own escalation in the classroom (e.g. when they do not understand what to do; when another student instigates distraction; when their needs are not being met).

In Tier 1, teachers are asked to consider how their classroom actions, routines, and curriculum facilitate students' self-regulation by implementing strategies for sensory integration, co-regulation, rhythm within routines and mindfulness. The first aim is to create classroom environments wherein the climate is one of de-escalation. Healthy classroom routines include activities for students to integrate multi-sensory inputs, proactively seeking opportunities to regulate their own stress responses, and practicing mindfulness throughout the day to provide the deliberate practice and rhythmic habits to successfully meet the challenges of learning new skills and content.

In Tier 2, teachers are prompted to increase relational capacity within their students. Trauma impacts a child or young person's capacity to create healthy relationships and often, students arrive at school with a history of ruptured attachments with teachers and other school staff from their past (Cole et al., 2009). Arising from the literature were concepts and themes deemed integral for teachers' understanding of what it takes to create and sustain healthy relationships with students who resist relational interactions. Teachers increase the relational capacities of their students when they build relationships with students based upon attachment and attunement, unconditional positive regard, emotional intelligence and priming the classroom with play and fun.

In Tier 3, teachers are prompted to facilitate classroom environments wherein their students can increase psychological resources for wellbeing (Fredrickson & Joiner, 2002). Ensuring that the TIPE model includes student wellbeing strategies stems from Keyes' (2002) two-factor theory of wellbeing within a developmental approach. Tier 3, increasing psychological resources, next prompts teachers to consider a range of positive psychology interventions (known as positive education; Norrish et al., 2013; Waters et al., 2017) that have been shown to increase student wellbeing. Teachers can increase the impacts of positive emotion by extending and sustaining this through savouring practices; they can anchor their curriculum in character strengths to draw out curiosity, gratitude, kindness and love of learning; they can consider instructional planning through flow principles for engagement; and they can intentionally teach mindsets for learning (e.g. growth-, resilient- and hope-mindset).

Our initial aims with TIPE were to introduce a new conceptual model to our research and practice colleagues and to encourage the field's future research and application of TIPE within the wide array of community schools in which TIPE could be of value. Preliminary research proposed that positive shifts in teacher practice occur when teachers work within a TIPE approach. We found that within cycles of action research supporting teachers to learn and apply TIPE, teachers developed strategies to increase self-regulation in students (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2016a) and developed strategies to increase relational capacity and wellbeing in students (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2019). Over time, teachers witnessed students seeking more active support (e.g. seeking out teacher support to clarify questions when learning; seeking out teacher support to mitigate student drama before it because a public issue within the class), proactively choosing strategies to de-escalate and self-regulate, forming stronger relationships, and identifying and working from their strengths (Brunzell, Stokes & Waters, 2019).

The next step for us was to investigate a specific practice model underpinned by TIPE intentionally designed for Australian schools. With industry partner Berry Street Victoria (one of Australia's largest child and family welfare agencies which includes a specialist therapeutic school and education services; www.bsem.org.au), the Berry Street Education Model (BSEM) emerged as one such practice adaptation (for more information see Brunzell et al., 2015). In partnership between our teams at the University of Melbourne and Berry Street, our longitudinal investigations (detailed below) began to specifically explore trauma-informed leadership practices predicated on the evidence including student outcomes alongside teachers' and leadership teams' reflections and recommendations.

Leading the Implementation of Trauma-Informed Positive Education

We have been guided by these two research questions: *What strategies were particularly relevant for leaders in schools on their trauma-aware journey? What did leaders say made a difference to improving both the learning and wellbeing for students in their schools?* An evaluation was initially conducted with two mainstream schools (both primary and secondary) in Victoria over of year (Stokes & Turnbull 2016). A further three year evaluation was conducted

with three other mainstream schools (two primary and one P-12) in Victoria (Stokes & Farrelly, 2019; Stokes et al., 2019). Both evaluations drew on data from interviews (with leaders, teachers and students) and surveys (with students). Across the five schools that have been evaluated, there have been common themes and some differences in both the leadership and implementation of the TIPE model of practice in schools.

For TIPE to meet both the learning and wellbeing needs of students, it was important that it was implemented across many levels of school operations. A common theme has been the prioritisation for leaders to include TIPE into their school strategic plans and/or annual improvement plans. Beyond being an important symbol of strategic direction for school improvement, this also allowed resources to be allocated across the school – specifically the planning of time spent on professional learning in TIPE by all staff in the school including leaders, teachers and ancillary staff. Embedding TIPE into their school's strategic plan enabled buy-in through all levels of the school from governing council to teachers, staff, parents and carers.

The findings for leaders regarding involvement in professional learning in TIPE mirror findings for that of an instructionally focused leader. Robinson and Gray (2019) identify the importance of relating professional learning to the learning needs of the students. Leaders understood this and the importance of extending this to their wellbeing needs as well (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019). The greatest impact on student outcomes occurred when all leaders were engaged in the professional learning (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016). From engagement in the professional learning and an ongoing commitment to TIPE, leaders developed a shared culture and understanding of TIPE. Some of the key strategies here were: designating a school wide leader of TIPE; providing time for modelling of successful strategies in staff meetings; and embedding TIPE into the rituals of the school such as the school assembly, transition routines, daily check-ins with students, and student study groups and care team meetings. These processes helped develop a common language and literacy of TIPE for leaders, teachers and students and enhanced teamwork between all staff members (Stokes & Brunzell, 2019).

One of the clear differences in implementation undertaken by school leaders was in how the TIPE strategies were delivered to the students. When the strategies were integrated into the academic pedagogy and curriculum in the classroom, there were clear improvements in student academic outcomes and wellbeing. When the strategies were delivered only through pastoral care programs, and not integrated into the curriculum, the improvements were only seen in student wellbeing but not in academic outcomes in the shorter term (Stokes & Turnbull, 2016). These findings suggest that effective implementation of TIPE occurred when teachers were prompted to see TIPE as a set of pedagogical lenses that informed all classroom interactions and practice – particularly within the core priority of academic curriculum. When TIPE was seen as a 'wellbeing add-on', the take up and sustainability of the values and strategies inherent in TIPE lost momentum for both students and their teachers.

Further, there were differences between TIPE implementation in primary versus secondary schools. Primary schools were more able to integrate the strategies into the classroom and curriculum throughout the day. Leaders in primary schools were also more likely to be part of the professional learning program in TIPE than in larger secondary schools (Stokes et al., 2019). Within secondary schools, our evidence suggests that while there can be pockets (i.e. specific

year-levels) that embedded TIPE well, it is far more complex to institute a whole-school approach due to the various structures and silos inherent in most secondary schools. While the complexity of these structures, particularly around staff time for professional learning, are surmountable, it requires secondary school leadership teams to invest significant effort and energy to align their professional learning goals in addition to ensuring there are effective mechanisms for teacher feedback and accountability in place.

Through time, our research suggests that transforming schools from trauma-affected to trauma-aware requires nothing less than a complete shift in school culture and climate. For schools where TIPE pedagogy improved student academic and wellbeing outcomes, there was a comprehensive re-evaluation of the practices, daily rhythms, and curriculum to ensure that the values and goals of each staff member were aligned.

These findings have implications for leaders. Although many leaders seek to shift their school community from being trauma-affected to trauma-aware, leaders will do well to understand the significant investment and potential disruption to all aspects of school practice. For some leaders, it took considerable time and effort to break through limiting teacher beliefs (i.e. the teacher's self-perceived role of only delivering curriculum) to expanding their professional responsibilities (i.e. nurturing student relationships through trauma-informed principles). To enable the consistent approach required to support trauma-affected students and to mitigate the negative impacts of secondary traumatic stressors on staff, leaders had to proactively consider all leavers of school change to increase both the willingness and capacity of their staff.

Reflection

We developed the TIPE model with aims of supporting future researchers and practitioners to de-silo from separately arising practice paradigms and to developmentally integrate trauma-informed practice and positive education. Our hope is that through the publication and dissemination of TIPE, culturally responsive and community context-specific models of TIPE will emerge. We are pleased to receive reports that schools are now learning about and adapting TIPE to meet the context-specific needs within their own unique communities.

Building upon the aforementioned promising strategies that leaders are using to implement whole-school shifts through TIPE, the next phase of our research is centred upon exploring trauma-aware leaders as they build leadership communities of practice. We identify this as *trauma-aware collective leadership*, and we posit that by working together within their communities, leaders who are already well travelled on their TIPE journey will galvanise their collective experience to revision TIPE as a systems-approach within a community's schools. Given the complex systemic factors negatively impacting children and young people, a system-wide approach may be required to sustain and build upon trauma-aware foundations. Whilst systems are often volatile, chaotic, unpredictable, they also provide significant opportunities for growth and innovation. School leaders must be bolstered through models like TIPE to lead the change that our children and young people deserve.

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