

TRAUMA-AWARE TEACHING:

**Strengthening teacher practice
so ALL of our students can learn**

Tom Brunzell, Director of Education, Berry Street





This issue of the Teacher Learning Network journal is devoted to the emerging science and practice of trauma-aware teaching. The term trauma-aware has many synonyms in education. You may have heard 'trauma-informed' or 'trauma-sensitive' and as the field grows, terminology becomes more refined. In Australia, all of these terms currently refer to teachers and schools who understand that trauma's effect on a child's physical, neurological, emotional and social development can have devastating consequences for their learning and future pathway attainment. Childhood trauma disrupts the brain's ability to effectively connect and to integrate the body. These disconnections can sometimes—perhaps often for some students—make learning impossible.

Up to 40% of students have experienced adverse childhood experiences that left unsupported, can lead them to be trauma-affected (Anda et al., 2005). Trauma can be defined as an overwhelming experience that undermines one's belief that the world is good and safe. Childhood trauma can occur from one-time events in the community or family (i.e., the loss of a loved one or experiencing a bush fire). However, in those cases there can be family and community support to assist the children to recover. We are quite concerned when a child experiences relational trauma which is often the negative result of ongoing abuse, neglect and violence in the family and/or community. For young people, this is not a onetime event, rather a continuing set of environmental challenges that deeply impacts the healthy development of children.

We also need to recognise the effects of intergenerational and systemic trauma within communities. In Australia, many of our schools are educating Aboriginal or students newly arriving to our communities as refugees, as well as students in historically disadvantaged communities affected by systemic issues of poverty. Trauma-aware teachers are mindful that every child has a story that we can see and often cannot see.

Sometimes students who are trauma-affected have been clinically diagnosed or informally labelled as having attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) or oppositional defiance disorder (ODD); however, these kinds of labels may not adequately provide enough information for teachers to successfully move forward with students. We know that childhood trauma can co-occur with many of these conditions and is often harder to spot and diagnose by a trained clinician without a detailed family history.

What is going on here?

You may have seen students in your classroom and thought:

- Why is he melting down right now over a very small thing?
- This student could do this learning task yesterday and today—she's totally given up.
- Why is he going from 0 -100 in two seconds?
- Why does she treat me like the enemy?

These questions ruminate in our heads as educators and without training and support, our profession can feel very lonely. Trauma-aware educators know that it is up to us as educators to create a classroom environment that is safe, de-escalated, and connected. These are the environments that promote learning when students feel heightened and try to meet their own needs in unhealthy and/or disruptive ways.

A hopeful turn for teacher practice

Understanding the impacts of trauma in students and in their communities provides an opportunity for teachers. Once we've learned more about why students struggle, we can move forward to creating new pathways for teacher practice, pedagogy and school culture to help children meet their own needs in healthy ways throughout the day. Trauma-aware practice connects teachers to a community of like-minded caring professionals. Here are some of the powerful themes in this new paradigm that are bolstering teachers on their journey:

- *Trauma-affected students have complex unmet needs. When we gain deeper understandings on how trauma disrupts healthy child development, we can see how children are reaching out for help through escalated or withdrawn behaviour. They do not quite know yet how to meet their own needs and it is up to us to assess and give them effective strategies to do so.*
- *Trauma-affected students have a need for control. We all do! But, as professional adults, we often know how to seek healthy empowerment in our environment. Students often grab control and attention in the classroom because that is the safest place to explore the need to build their developing self-concept.*
- *Trauma-affected students can struggle to self-reflect. Often, we talk to students about the choices they have made or have them participate in restorative conversations. But these strategies require deep reflection on the teacher's part to ensure that students don't feel under-pressure to understand something that they are not developmentally ready for. We certainly never give up on restorative work with students, however, we must set the students up for success in such meetings.*
- *Trauma-aware practice begins with self-regulation. Our research suggests that the first port of call for teachers is to employ effective strategies for increasing self-regulation (both physical and emotional regulation) within the classroom through bringing a sense of rhythm and mindfulness back into the body and into the environment (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016).*
- *Trauma-aware practice is about increasing relational capacity. Trauma-affected students often push away attempts from teachers to create classroom-based relationships, and thus, it is up to teachers to make as many relational connections as possible, grounded in unconditional positive regard, within the school day.*

WHAT CAN I DO TO UNDERSTAND?

This is an opportunity for you

Trauma-aware practice offers a path of refinement for our teaching, our professional and our own personal journeys. As a community, if we can reach and teach the most vulnerable students, then we can reach and teach everyone. Remember, when students resist, push you away, or struggle in classrooms, our first instincts are to say, 'Why is he doing this to me in my classroom?' Trauma-aware practice prompts the teacher to say, 'Wow, he is trying to meet a need right now and it's not working out for anyone in the room. What can I do to understand where this is coming from, and maintain a proactive pathway of support?'

Our research is also indicating that teachers who take this on and try these strategies in their own personal lives by building up their own self-regulatory capacities and increasing their own relational abilities are noticing that they feel stronger and more able to step through the thresholds of their classrooms to proactively teach their students (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2019).

Perhaps a warning to us all is that teachers who work with trauma-affected students who do not try to integrate trauma-aware strategies into their own lives may be on a pathway towards professional burnout (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2018). When facing trauma-affected students each day, a teacher cannot help but experience the vicarious effects of secondary traumatic stress (including compassion fatigue and vicarious trauma) because biologically, we often mirror and take on the stress of others in front of us.

We are in this together

As trauma-aware teachers we can see the improvement of our practice as dual-process through a trauma-aware mindset. By transforming ourselves and our own capacities to de-escalate, self-regulate, and relate to others, we are strengthening the students' abilities to de-escalate, self-regulate, and relate to others. This is how teachers change once they begin learning about childhood trauma and how to forge a way forward for their school communities. Our colleagues believe that as a community of teachers, working together, we can in fact shift the paradigm in schools to be more inclusive, more understanding, and more proactive to assist the students who need our help the most.

Author

Tom Brunzell is the Director of Education at Berry Street and co-creator of the Berry Street Education Model (BSEM), a trauma-informed positive education approach to teaching and learning. He can be contacted at tbrunzell@berrystreet.org.au

References

Anda, R.F., et al. (2005). The enduring effects of abuse and related adverse experiences in childhood: A convergence of evidence from neurobiology and epidemiology. *European Archives Psychiatry Clinical Neuroscience*, 256, 174-186. doi: 10.1007/s00406-005-0624-4

Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2016). Trauma-Informed Positive Education: Using positive psychology to strengthen vulnerable students. *Contemporary School Psychology*, 20, 63-83. DOI: 10.1007/s40688-015-0070-x

Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2018). Why do you work with struggling students? Teacher perceptions of meaningful work in trauma-impacted classrooms. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 43(2), 116-142. DOI: 10.14221/ajte.2018v43n2.7

Brunzell, T., Stokes, H., & Waters, L. (2019). Shifting Teacher Practice in Trauma-Affected Classrooms: Practice Pedagogy Strategies Within a Trauma-Informed Positive Education Model. *School Mental Health*, 1-15.

A powerful partnership

TLN welcomes Berry Street as a partner in the production of this special issue of the TLN Journal. TLN has worked with Tom Brunzell and Brendan Bailey of Berry Street to bring this journal together. Berry Street have sourced the authors for this journal from their network of researchers, academics, supporters and school partners.

TLN recognised the need for teachers to be supported in developing their practice to be 'trauma-aware' and our research led us to the unique expertise of Berry Street, and the development of a trauma-aware framework to support teachers. TLN extends a heartfelt thank you to Berry Street and their network for their outstanding contributions to this journal. We hope that all teachers and leaders will find the time to read this material, to generate a discussion in the workplace, and to reflect on how their own practice can be informed by the content of this journal as they transform into trauma-aware teachers and leaders.

Dr. Michael Victory
TLN Executive Officer
TLN Journal Editor

BERRY STREET
EDUCATION MODEL
Curriculum and Classroom Strategies

tln

Teacher
Learning
Network