Premier’s **Masterton Homes** Special Education Scholarship

Trauma-Informed Practices and Systems in Schools (TIPS): present dilemmas, future possibilities

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Many Australian children are exposed to traumatic events; some are natural disasters, but many more are such events as grief, loss, parent mental illness or substance abuse, physical and sexual abuse, and domestic violence. Recent studies (APA, 2015) estimate two-thirds of students have experienced a traumatic event before the age of 16, while new research from the United States suggests that as many as 13 out of 30 students in an average classroom will have toxic stress from three or more traumatic experiences (Blodgett, Harrington, Lohan, et al., 2013).

Compared with children with no adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), these children are:

* + 3 times more likely to fail school
  + 5 times more likely to have severe attendance problems
  + 6 times more likely to have severe behaviour problems
  + 4 times more likely to have self-reports of poor health.

In the longer term, childhood trauma has been strongly linked to a multitude of health and social problems including substance abuse, incarceration, chronic disease, and early death (Felliti, 1998).

In Australia, a recent economic report found that 5 million adults are affected by childhood trauma, and the Australian government would save approximately $ 9.1 billion by addressing childhood trauma (Kezelman, Hossack, Stavropoulos, & Burley, 2015). Early intervention though changing the way we respond to and support trauma affected children in our schools offers a promising opportunity to improve outcomes for many in our society.

Due to the high prevalence of traumatic stress in children and current Australian legislation, regular schools are increasingly responsible for educating students with emotional and behavioural disturbances caused by traumatic experiences. A growing body of evidence indicates that students experiencing trauma and chronic stress need specific education interventions due to the biopsychosocial changes to which trauma can contribute (e.g. Perry, 2007).

Nevertheless, teachers are unlikely to have an understanding of how complex stress and trauma affect learning and behaviour. Studies indicate they do not feel adequately equipped with the knowledge and skills required to support the needs of students with challenging behaviours (Fields, 2004; Vinson, 2002). Furthermore, routine behavior control practices (timeout and yelling, suspensions and expulsions) may in fact be counterproductive or exacerbate trauma-related behaviour such as disengagement and behavioural disruption (Borstein, 2014). Therefore, there is a need not only to train individual teachers how to address the needs of students with trauma, but more importantly to build the capacity of schools as a whole to support these students.

A growing body of evidence suggests that schools can improve outcomes for these students using compassionate trauma-sensitive practices (Walkley & Cox, 2013). Settings that have implemented trauma-informed educational practices are reporting significant improvements in student social, behavioural and academic outcomes. For example, schools are reporting between 50 and 90 per cent decreases in disciplinary referrals and suspensions, and 10 to 20 per cent academic improvement in composite performance and student growth indices. In recognition of their effectiveness, trauma-informed practices are being implemented in schools district-wide across California, Oregon, Washington and Massachusetts.

My scholarship tour was focused on visits to education settings that are using a trauma-informed approach to support students. I also met with academics from universities who are helping schools become trauma-informed. I wanted to understand how current research about child development, attachment, resilience, and neurobiology of learning are being applied to improve learning outcomes, creating safer school environments for students and staff alike.

In this report, the terms ‘trauma-informed’ and ‘trauma-sensitive’ will be used interchangeably to reflect variations in nomenclature.

Schools using Trauma Informed Practices and Systems (TIPS schools) apply core principles of child development, attachment, and trauma research to develop practices, policies and procedures that are compassionate, supportive, and effective.

Whole-school approaches to wellbeing are prioritised. Teaching practices emphasise social and emotional skill development as well as cognitive development. Professional learning builds staff capacity to self-reflect, manage their own emotional wellbeing, and facilitate student socio-emotional growth as much as academic development. Practices that build relationships between staff and students are a priority. Discipline policies reflect relationship-based approaches to building connection, resilience, problem solving, and responsibility.

Key findings

**All school staff are trained in the nature and prevalence of trauma and its impact on the brain, learning and behaviour**

Trauma-informed educational policy and practice is rooted in research studying the short- and long-term consequences of childhood adversity. Trauma is not an event, but a response to a stressful experience that can leave a person feeling hopeless, helpless, fearing for their life/survival and their safety. Trauma can affect a student’s ability to learn, form relationships, and function appropriately in the classroom. Children who experience complex stress from multiple adverse child experiences have potential for even more substantial social and academic impairment.

The work of experts in child development and neuroscience such as Dr Bruce Perry and Dr Dan Siegel has proven that neurobiological changes occur in the brain when a child is stressed. Triggers and associated strong feelings make the emotional centres and oldest, most reptile-like lower parts of the brain take control. The body produces stress hormones such as adrenaline and cortisol to aid a fight, flight or freeze response to the perceived threat. The brain’s more advanced frontal regions, which govern our ability to learn new things, think logically, and process verbal information, shut down. These normal physiological changes increase the likelihood of out-of-control behaviour as a child attempts to cope with the threat, or perceived threat, before them. Simultaneously, these biological responses drastically decrease our capacity to behave calmly, follow instructions and get along with others. It’s little wonder that trying to teach, reason with, or punish a stressed, distressed or angry student rarely gets us anywhere, and often makes things worse.

*A trauma-informed perspective encourages us to move from asking ‘What’s wrong with you?’ to ‘What happened to you?’*

In TIPS schools, all staff are trained in essential aspects of child development, attachment, and the neurobiology of stress so they understand why students behave the way they do, how to recognise triggers, and how to intervene effectively to reduce the frequency and severity of disruptive behaviour episodes. Staff demonstrate a perspective shift from perceiving behaviour as a way to manipulate or act disobediently to seeing behaviour as a way to communicate needs and get needs met. Importantly, they are also trained in ongoing self-care practices to help recognise and manage their own stress and affect so they can respond with consistency and empathy to their students’ needs.

**TIPS schools use a whole-school approach to wellbeing, focused on building resilience and empowerment.**

Wellbeing itself is a holistic concept and efforts to promote student wellbeing demand a whole-school rather than a siloed approach. This means a focus on the protective factors that schools can provide as well as the skills, knowledge and understanding schools can teach to enhance student wellbeing. Fraillon (2004) states that student wellbeing cannot be viewed in isolation from the broader school context and that school communities not only provide the defining context, they also have the potential to significantly influence wellbeing.

In TIPS schools, whole school systems are designed to equip students with skills to recognise and manage their own emotions and resolve conflict peacefully and effectively. Students are explicitly taught how to recognize and manage thoughts and feelings through social and emotional learning (SEL) programs. Many SEL programs exist, though Second Step is one of strongest in research base and evidence for effectiveness. This program is designed to teach all students core learning skills of executive functioning such as focusing attention, ignoring distractions, self-talk and assertive communication. It also teaches students self-regulation and problem solving skills.

Various SEL studies and evaluations have shown that students who experience opportunities for social and emotional learning participate more in class, demonstrate more pro-social behaviour, have fewer absences, have improved attendance, show reductions in aggression and disruptive behaviour and are more likely to complete school. A meta-analysis of 213 studies of SEL programs involving 270,034 kindergarten through high school students in the United States (Durlak et al., 2011) indicated that, compared to control participants, students exposed to SEL demonstrated significantly improved social and emotional skills, attitudes, behaviour, and academic performance that reflected an 11-percentile-point gain in achievement.

Individual self-regulation skills are taught and supported by Tier 1 & 2 interventions, including peace corners in all classrooms. A peace corner is a small space reserved as a quiet place for students to go when they need to take a break. It is stocked with sensory aids and calming visuals such as emotion posters. These spaces are not a punishment, but a strategy offered to a student who might want to have some calming quiet time. Other self-regulation strategies are also available, such as taking walking breaks, buddy classrooms, and a trip to the wellness centre to take some time out, talk to a counsellor, or resolve an issue with others through restorative practices. In TIPS schools, teachers understand that calm students are more productive. Staff report that making time for SEL programming actually saves them time as they have fewer classroom management issues.

TIPS schools recognize all adults in the school are responsible for the care of the students, teachers, office staff, canteen workers, transport workers, and grounds staff. In Portland, Oregon, local high schools have made a commitment to meet the needs of all students in their care and have used TIPS to build the capacity of school staff to respond to children with emotional and behaviour support needs. Consequently, this district of Portland is bucking the trend for more special education placements with the recent closure of the behaviour school, Alpha HS, due to lack of demand for emotional disturbance or behavior disorder placements.

**PBIS is used to teach expectations and create consistent, predictable environments.**

School-wide interventions such as Positive Behavioural Interventions and Supports (PBIS) or Positive Behaviour for Learning (Dunning, 2012) have been demonstrated in the literature to be effective in building capacity of schools to address behaviour issues. PBIS/PBL is an important component of a trauma-informed school. It offers a framework for establishing clear and consistent expectations across all school settings. Children who have experienced trauma are in a heightened state of stress, and safety-seeking becomes a priority at the expense of higher order thinking skills. Consistency is critical for establishing a safe and predictable environment so students can become calm enough to learn. Although effective for the majority of students, PBIS/PBL is firmly based in behaviourist methodology. As such, it does not incorporate the growing body of research about the emotional and neurodevelopmental needs of traumatised children.

The TIPS framework compliments and extends established school-wide behaviour management approaches. Students with severe behavioural needs often also experience emotional disturbance. PBL has limited capacity to change the behaviour of students with the most intensive support needs (Tier 3). TIPS offers targeted support interventions that go beyond the behaviour to address the core emotional and neurobiological needs of traumatised children.

The Response to Intervention model of tiered interventions is used to target trauma-sensitive policies and practices with added focus on students’ emotional responses as well as their symptomatic behaviour. When schools recognise, understand and meet a traumatised student’s emotional needs for safety and connection, behaviour issues decrease and learning outcomes improve.

**TIPS schools use relationship-based approaches to heal and build connected learning communities.**

TIPS schools commonly use the Restorative Practices (RP) framework to promote community, acceptance, and belonging in a safe environment. The aim of the framework is to focus on making connections, strengthening relationships and in repairing harm as a way of building community. It incorporates inclusive, integrated and proactive approaches with a major goal of effectively reintegrating students when addressing situations where harm has been done.

The key values of Restorative Practices are:

* + creating an ethos of respect
  + inclusion
  + fostering accountability and taking responsibility
  + committing to relationships
  + developing impartiality
  + being non-judgmental
  + enhancing collaboration
  + fostering empowerment and emotional expressiveness.

RP’s skill-based training teaches a variety of communication skills, anger management techniques, and conflict management strategies to give students the capacity to deal with their conflicts productively.

Schools embracing the RP framework report a safer, more connected environment with higher levels of student achievement as existing and new practices are framed through the restorative lens. RP has proven so successful in improving school culture that the San Francisco Unified School Districts office now has a team of specialists to support schools to develop and implement the framework in their settings.

**TIPS school discipline policies focus on building skills, relationships and responsibility.**

Attendance at school with caring adult supervision is a major protective factor for vulnerable children. When students become disengaged from school through absenteeism or suspension their potential for harm magnifies. Students are often unsupervised or inappropriately cared for in dysfunction home environments, or wander the streets with similarly disaffected peers who may be an antisocial influence. Several Australian studies have shown that school suspension may increase the likelihood of the student engaging in antisocial and violent behaviour and becoming involved in the criminal justice system. A student suspended from school is 50 per cent more likely to engage in antisocial behaviour and 70 per cent more likely to engage in violent behaviour in the next 12 months (Hemphill et al., 2010). The studies controlled for such other risk factors as previous violent behaviour or spending time with violent peers. According to an American Psychological Association Task Force on Zero Tolerance report (2008), there is no evidence that suspensions increase discipline. Rather, suspensions have been related to a number of negative consequences, such as intensifying academic difficulties and school drop-out, disengagement from school, criminal activity, and alcohol and drug use.

TIPS schools minimise the use of out of school suspension as a disciplinary practice. They favour proven behaviour management discipline strategies that focus on social and emotional skill development, early intervention, violence prevention, and positive behaviour support. Instead of traditional detention or suspension, strategies may include spending time with trained staff in a reflection room, or in-school suspension where students engage in school service tasks. Restorative Practices are often used to resolve conflict and remediate problems and poor behaviour in a tiered model of intervention from Tier 1 class circle meetings and problem solving to tier 3 restorative conferences and problem solving circles. Schools implementing effective alternatives to zero-tolerance strategies have reported reductions in office discipline referrals by 50 to 90 per cent. They also report increases in engaged learning time and improved academic performance for all students.

**TIPS schools connect with the wider community of families and external support agencies to build resilience and support.**

TIPS schools understand that family circumstances greatly influence a child’s capacity to engage successfully with learning. Indeed, they recognize that school readiness begins with a healthy pregnancy because maternal health and wellbeing influences early brain development. They seek opportunities for collaboration with parents and carers and community agencies that also support families who may experience vulnerabilities. TIPS schools participate in multi-disciplinary community taskforces of representatives from education, justice, health, community services, juvenile justice sectors. These teams work in partnership to share resources and coordinate programs that reduce the occurrence and impact of adverse child experiences and complex stress.

Nobel Laureate Economist Professor James Heckman’s research (2013) shows that the best economic return for investment on human capital occurs in the earliest years of a child’s life. Disadvantaged families are least likely to have the economic and social resources to provide the successful early developmental stimulation every child needs as a basic opportunity for future success in school, university, career and life. TIPS schools use innovative programs to connect with families and develop children’s health, social and cognitive skills long before the child enrols at school.

Examples include:

* + school-based community rooms and agency partnerships with human services and welfare providers who operate in schools and on school grounds
  + school-based playgroups and preschool transition programs fostering early engagement with services and building child development skills for school readiness
  + parent education programs, including adult literacy and numeracy; computing; understanding the education system and expectations; healthy nutrition; positive parenting; English as a Second Language (these programs are also offered in minority languages)
  + school-based health clinics and public health nurses, social workers, and allied health workers at school
  + school-based traditional language and culture programs which promote cultural identity through language and cultural practices; connections with elders and leaders in the community; and healing of intergenerational trauma and disconnectedness.

Trauma-informed education offers a framework for supporting all students, including those with additional emotional and behaviour needs. This approach is research-based and continues to produce gains in academic achievement as well as decreases in behaviour concerns and disciplinary referrals. TIPS in an innovative solution to meeting all nine elements of the *National Safe Schools Framework*:

* + leadership commitment to a safe school
  + a supportive and connected school community
  + policies and procedures
  + positive behaviour management
  + engagement, skill development and safe school curriculum
  + a focus on student wellbeing and student ownership
  + early intervention and targeted support
  + partnerships with families and communities.

Current work and future directions

I have initiated a doctoral research project with Western Sydney University to introduce trauma-informed knowledge and practices to NSW schools. This program will focus on developing and implementing a leadership driven, school-wide framework of guiding principles and evidence based practices to build whole-school capacity in supporting all students, including those affected by trauma.

In partnership with the Macquarie Park out-of-home care program, I am developing a professional learning framework which will span the continuum of professional development and is aligned with both the Australian Teaching Standards and Principal Standards.

At Hassall Grove Public School, the largest primary school in the Mount Druitt region, we have begun school-wide implementation of a classroom-based SEL program. We are developing a community playgroup for pre-schoolers, and parent classes in child development, positive parenting, health and nutrition. We are also planning an innovative kindergarten program with strong emphasis on social and emotional skill development.

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