

Strengthening Trauma-Sensitive Education

Developing accredited training based on evaluations from primary, post-primary, and tertiary educators

Introduction

Between May 2022 and June 2023, trauma awareness sessions were delivered to several primary, post-primary, and tertiary education settings across Cork city and county. A post-training survey (n = 248) was distributed to the participants that would inform the development of forthcoming trauma-informed training. Ethical approval was obtained from Munster Technological University (MTU) Cork.

The survey data revealed that 69% (n = 171) of participants had not received any trauma training during their initial teacher training or continuing professional development (CPD) courses. Ní Chorcora and Swords (2022) highlight teachers' potential to identify students' mental health issues, but inadequate training can hinder effective classroom interventions.

In Ireland, the pandemic has highlighted the exacerbation of pre-existing inequalities, intensifying economic, social, and psychological pressures on children (Mulholland and O'Toole, 2021, p.329). There is a rising presence of children in Irish classrooms who have experienced war and displacement (DoE, 2023). As Delaney (2022) posits, however, children and adults with trauma experiences are not a novel phenomenon in education settings. Drawing on data from the Growing Up in Ireland study, Gardner et al. (2019) found that more than 75% of children had experienced at least one adverse experience before the age of nine.

The prevalence of trauma has prompted concern among some NGOs in Ireland, such as Mental Health Ireland and Alcohol Action Ireland (2020), leading them to advocate for the immediate implementation of trauma-informed practices (TIPs). Given the prevalence of trauma in our



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Trauma awareness sessions were recently held in Cork, followed by a post-training survey. The study, approved by MTU Cork, found that 69% of participants lacked trauma training during initial teacher training or continuing professional development. Based on the data, a framework for trauma training was devised. This work aims to better support students with trauma experiences.

classrooms, teachers must recognise and respond to the needs of children who have experienced trauma (SAMHSA, 2014).

A trauma-informed approach

The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), an organisation with a trauma-informed approach, 'acknowledges the far-reaching effects of trauma and comprehends potential routes to recovery; identifies the indications and manifestations of trauma . . .; and takes action by seamlessly incorporating awareness about trauma into policies, protocols, and actions, while actively striving to prevent re-traumatisation' (ibid., p.9). SAMHSA outlines six principles that underpin TIP in an organisation:

- » Safety: promoting a sense of physical and psychological safety
- » Trustworthiness and transparency: building and maintaining trust with everyone involved in the organisation
- » Peer support: enabling opportunities for trauma survivors to 'come together to build relationships in which they share their strengths and support each other's healing and growth' (Blanch et al., 2012, p.13)
- » Collaboration and mutuality: Healing in relationships can only come through responsive relationships (Butler et al., 2022). TIP emphasises building strong partnerships with 'meaningful sharing of power and decision-making' (SAMHSA, 2014, p.11)
- » Empowerment, voice, and choice: focusing on a strengths-based approach to support and enable self-advocacy and promote recovery
- » Cultural, historical, and gender issues: reflective practice in relation to cultural stereotypes and biases. Implementation of policies and procedures that are responsive to individuals' needs.

These principles provide a baseline for considering how organisations can effectively adopt a trauma-informed practice (Sharkey et al., 2023). However, the lack of specific evidence-informed training programmes for education settings may result in an ad hoc approach to the implementation and delivery of TIP in schools.

Developing a trauma-informed framework for education settings

While 94% of participants in the survey in Cork were interested in more training, Thomas et al. (2019) confirm that there is no dominant framework for trauma-informed education and care. The research team sought to develop a toolkit for future trauma training from the data gathered from this research. They identified five core elements that will form the basis for a trauma training course:

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- » Evidence-based information about adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and the impact of trauma across the life course: Berger et al. (2020) found that trauma-informed training enhances student engagement; reduces distress, suspensions, and post-traumatic stress; and alleviates youth depression. It also builds teachers' confidence and effectiveness when supporting students. Some respondents suggested that training should be made available to everyone who works at the school, including 'all staff, teachers, secretaries, cleaners, and caretakers' (adult education respondent).
- » Practical interventions that support healing in the classroom: 27% of respondents highlighted the need for future training to include a toolkit of practical strategies. Specific issues were noted, including good practices in teaching about mental health; specific supports for special educational needs; and ways to address distressed behaviour, support war-experienced or displaced people, address drug use, and implement restorative practice. This list, though not exhaustive, encapsulates several challenges that are affecting children's engagement in the classroom.
- » Building a culture of positive and respectful relationships in schools: According to Butler et al. (2022, p.150), 'key relationships with key people are the intervention' for toxic stress. Strong and supportive bonds can help de-escalate stress responses and help create a safe and successful learning environment (Willoughby, 2016). The importance of cultivating strong relationships that foster co-regulation was aptly captured by one respondent: 'I won't forget that relationships are built in the small moments. I've been thinking about this since I finished on Friday. I know I'm going to be a better teacher who offers a more compassionate classroom as a result.'
- » Shifting from a deficit- to a strengths-based approach: Some respondents expressed concerns about distinguishing between trauma-related and disruptive behaviour. The deficit model pathologises students for their behaviour, whereas a strengths-based approach understands the underlying factors that drive behaviour. Trauma-informed educators practice self-reflection, examining biases and beliefs while being sensitive to trauma's impact on the mind, body, and relationships (Butler et al., 2022). This approach focuses on students' strengths and acknowledges coping mechanisms developed in response to trauma, empowering learners to regain control and agency in their learning journey.
- » Self-care for school staff: Vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout can impact teachers' capacity to support students (Ní Chorcóra & Swords, 2022). As one respondent noted, 'I often find myself responding in a negative way, and I see now that I need to first regulate my response before I can help someone else regulate.' It is therefore essential that organisations develop clear protocols on training, supporting, and supervising staff.

Conclusion

While there is increased advocacy for implementing trauma-informed practice, there is a lack of empirical evidence on educators' understanding of TIP and its impact, and on the perceived facilitators and barriers to implementing effective programmes in education settings (Donisch et al., 2016; Maynard et al., 2019; Thomas et al., 2019). This research goes some way towards addressing this lacuna in scholarship by identifying teachers' and school staff's perspectives on the perceived tools required to support the implementation of TIP in schools. The information garnered aims to support the development of future trauma-informed training for teachers and school personnel.

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Traveller women hailed as changemakers

Five inspirational women from the Traveller community were hailed as “changemakers” and “role models for future generations” when presented with level six certificates by South East Technological University (SETU).

The women received certificates at a special award ceremony, held at SETU's College Street Campus in Waterford.

All five women are education and community development workers with Mincéirí Port Láirge's Brighter Futures Club.