



EMERALD STUDIES IN
TRAUMA-INFORMED
EDUCATION

TRAUMA- INFORMED EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

Developing Leadership
Practices Towards
Social Equity

HELEN STOKES
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Developing Leadership Practices
Towards Social Equity

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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FOREWORD TO THE SERIES

TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION: CONTEXTUALISING THIS PRACTICE

The area of trauma-informed education is a recently emerging field to support children and young people through their educational journey. As some educational settings contend with the impacts of social inequity, many students have been identified as trauma affected with significant unmet learning and social-emotional needs. It is, therefore, necessary that improvements in learning and teaching encompass the impacts of chronic stress experienced by students. To this end, trauma-informed education draws on the interdisciplinary fields of neurobiology, therapeutics, wellbeing, and social justice (Stokes et al., 2023). Trauma-informed education has grown out of the need for new responses at all levels of education to effectively provide education for students who are trauma-affected.

Trauma-informed practice crosses many fields of education. The series will provide an understanding of the breadth of the area and the practice of trauma-informed education across different contexts. It will include international perspectives of trauma-informed practice in the educational sector while highlighting the breadth of the newly emerging practice in this area, as well as understanding how different contexts embed trauma-informed practice. Perspectives from leaders, in-service teachers, and initial teacher education in all levels of the education sector will be included in the series from early childhood through to higher education as well as alternative settings.

The first book in the series, *Implementing Trauma-informed Pedagogies for School Change: Shifting Schools from Reactive to Proactive*, provides a review of trauma-informed education more broadly before focussing on trauma-informed positive education (TIPE). To provide an understanding of how TIPE is embedded in schools and its impact, there are case studies of a primary and secondary school that have implemented TIPE pedagogical change in their schools over the last four years.

The second book, *Trauma-informed Educational Leadership: Developing Leadership Practices Towards Social Equity*, focusses on how leaders enact trauma-informed and systems-aware leadership practices, as they engage in

bringing change to teaching practices in the schools while improving academic and social-emotional learning for the students.

Further books in the series will include trauma-informed culturally responsive pedagogies, as well as the perspectives of teacher educators who work in trauma-informed and culturally responsive ways in Indigenous communities. In other books, there will be a focus on neuroscience and how that informs trauma-informed practice in early childhood settings, as well as what it means to enact trauma-aware practice in higher education settings and foster emotional wellbeing. Bringing together the education sector will be a book on policy and practice in trauma-informed education. Across the series will be a breadth of perspectives on trauma-informed education that will be of interest to policy makers, academics, researchers, educational practitioners (from early childhood to higher education), and students (particularly in initial teacher education).

Helen Stokes, Lyra L'Estrange, and Meegan Brown

PREFACE

The roles and responsibilities of school principals and leadership teams have continuously evolved. Many began in their leadership positions knowing their roles required multiple capacities and capabilities towards strategic leadership, community engagement, and operational management. They often trained towards becoming instructional leaders, moonlighting as architects and learning space designers, doing their best to support allied professionals connected to the school, and becoming their community's experts in social-emotional learning and supporting positive behaviour. As researchers and practitioners in our discipline supporting school leadership teams over many years, we have witnessed firsthand how leaders choose to work in campuses as community guardians often driven by the values of social equity.

Our contention is that school leaders must continue to strive to do all these things with renewed purpose and knowledge. In the current contexts of systemic social and economic disruption around the world impacted by alarming and increasing rates of community and family violence, financial insecurity, environmental destabilisation, and adverse childhood experiences, schools are called on to meet these challenges. This requires significant skills and resources from school leaders, who themselves may be struggling with compassion fatigue, vicarious stress, service rationing, and burnout. Yet, each day they show up to support the children, young people, and staff in their care.

This book tells the journey of three research sites, each led by leaders continuously practising novel strategies that hold the possibility for progressing innovative leadership practices. As a direct response to the evolving roles that principals and educational leaders must inhabit, our research explores how these leaders moved from reactive to proactive and from trauma-impacted to trauma-informed. Each site was selected for its pre-existing commitment to trauma-informed education. As such, we aimed to contribute new knowledge about what leaders were doing to sustain trauma-informed practices in schools maturing into their long-term investments in trauma-informed education.

Schools in our case studies had learned and applied our unique model for trauma-informed positive education (TIPE; Brunzell et al., 2016). To note,

TIPE serves as the conceptual underpinning of the Berry Street Education Model (Brunzell & Norrish, 2024), and we acknowledge the generous and ongoing support of Berry Street Yooralla, a leading social care agency in Australia. We chose these schools due to their established commitment to trauma-informed values to support their students and to unite the aims of teaching and learning with social-emotional learning and trauma-informed classroom strategies. We introduced data collected during the research period in the first book in this series (Stokes & Brunzell, 2024). Following this, we knew a focus on trauma-informed leadership development must be our next priority to unify the evolving roles of school leaders and to forge new knowledge in our discipline of trauma-informed education.

This book features our research from six complete school years of data collection in schools, building on extensive trauma-informed practice learning with staff. You will learn about how leaders from these campuses applied trauma-informed practices to their understandings of what it means to be a leader. This included how they used trauma-informed strategies to enact school goals towards teaching and learning; wellbeing for self, staff, and students; physical environments for learning; and parent and carer engagement. Further, we developed innovative approaches that supported leadership development emerging from systems-aware scholarship.

In the book's final chapter, we articulate our new model for *trauma-informed educational leadership* (TIEL). For evidence supporting our initial design for TIEL, we drew on both longitudinal quantitative and qualitative findings with leaders and teachers to ensure our conclusions were grounded in the voices, experiences, and reflections of participants in our studies. We believe that this first version of TIEL is a promising start. We invite future researchers and practice leaders who support leadership development across their educational systems to build on our work and to iterate and adapt TIEL to the unique cultures and communities that they serve.

Helen Stokes, Jack Greig, and Tom Brunzell

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Thank you to the schools involved, who have welcomed us into their communities, given their time, and undertaken this research journey with us. Your commitment to wanting to make a difference for your students and their families has been an inspiration to us to share your stories.

Thank you to Penny Johnson, who has yet again supported our writing through her close attention to detail and editing.

We gratefully acknowledge the support we receive from family, friends, and professional colleagues at Berry Street Yooralla and the University of Melbourne.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

We would like to acknowledge the Traditional Custodians of the lands where we live, work, and learn, the waters we reside by, the Bunurong/Boon Wurung and Wurundjeri peoples of the Kulin Nation, and pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging. It is a privilege to stand on their lands and it's our collective responsibility to care, protect, and nurture the country.

We acknowledge the rich and diverse living cultures of all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. We acknowledge their strength and resilience and commit to empowering young Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to become strong cultural leaders in their community.

Written by Noongar and Torres Strait Islander students at Garron Secondary College

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INTRODUCTION TO TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP

There is a pressing need for schools and their leadership teams to adapt to rapidly changing community contexts. These contexts are represented by increasing social complexity and compressing economic uncertainty for many. A growing body of research brings attention to the effects of compounding stressors in Australian schools, such as community-wide natural disasters ([Berger et al., 2018](#)), systemic racism ([Schimke et al., 2022](#)), and exclusionary practices ([Miller & Berger, 2020](#)). This research comes in direct response to recent local and global events that have brought a heightened awareness of the impacts of environmental devastation hastened by climate change, structural disempowerment of First Nations peoples, intergenerational poverty affecting marginalised communities, and the resurgent threat of punitive and authoritarian values escalating human rights violations and violent conflict in Australia and across the world.

We are acutely concerned by the impacts of these global and local developments, which guide our inquiry into relevant practices towards social equity and democratic values. Our work subjectively aims to help communities requiring our collective attention. Our actions are grounded in the value that if schools can effectively serve students made vulnerable by adverse childhood experiences, they are growing capacities and capabilities to serve the diverse communities and cultures represented by all their students.

We extend the justification for trauma-informed schools by providing the emerging evidence base for trauma-informed educational leadership (TIEL). For the last 20 years, we have contributed to scholarship emerging as a promising practice of trauma-informed education for student outcomes, both

academic and wellbeing. Our research with leaders now suggests there are key leadership practices for implementing trauma-informed strategies for whole-school change. These include embedded supports for upskilling and supporting staff to learn and then to sustain trauma-informed education, as well as incorporating the mindset of a trauma-informed leader, who is working towards student achievement and equity within their communities.

This book serves as our first comprehensive report of ongoing longitudinal research in TIEL. It is part of our efforts to document work with leaders over time, as they have attempted to change their schools from trauma-impacted to trauma-informed and from a reactive to proactive approach with their professional staff. This research continues our action-research approach with leaders and teachers as they engaged in professional learning in trauma-informed positive education (TIPE) (Brunzell et al., 2016; Brunzell & Norrish, 2024), which serves as the intervention model throughout.¹ TIPE was developed to meet dual concerns within the classroom for *healing* and *growth* in the service of learning. Following that, the leaders undertook further leadership professional learning and coaching to develop aspects of their trauma-informed leadership practices. The longitudinal nature of the research provides evidence of change in student outcomes, staff practices, and staff wellbeing over time.

After establishing TIPE in the literatures, our next priority was to position trauma-informed education as a pedagogical practice model for teaching and learning, along with the delivery of academic curriculum. Through prior investigations conducted in schools (Stokes, 2022; Stokes & Brunzell, 2024), we now have evidence of the impact on school change that TIPE can have when it is employed for instructional planning, professional learning, and its subsequent implementation for teachers. The research was conducted in schools that had previously struggled to deliver positive academic and wellbeing outcomes for their students.

In this book, we explore how leaders support and galvanise teachers and allied school professionals (i.e. pastoral care, wellbeing, and allied education staff) to increase practice capacities and capabilities to incorporate new pedagogical intervention. We started with four questions:

1. In what ways could school leaders move their schools from undertaking professional learning in TIPE to then implementing, growing, and sustaining trauma-informed cultures and high-expectation climates for learning?

1 TIPE is the conceptual framework for the Berry Street Education Model (Brunzell & Norrish, 2021, 2024; see www.bssem.org.au).

2. What leadership practices are pivotal to leverage and bring about positive change?
3. How were these leadership strategies adapted to the unique cultural and community contexts of each school?
4. What are possible implications and future directions for developing responsive, compassionate, and equitable approaches to leading schools now and into the future of education?

RESEARCH SITES

The research is drawn from three sites including a government secondary college with its feeder primary school, a government Preparatory²-to-Year 9 school, and an independent specialist (flexible learning option) school. We purposely selected schools for our research that were embedded in communities with historic and generational education inequity. We also selected schools whose leaders held a deep desire to work towards social change for their children and young people and also strived to support their parents and carers. Some of the schools were having difficulty with their delivery of learning and wellbeing outcomes for students as evidenced by their low standardised testing and teacher judgement results, and by student responses in the Attitudes to School Survey (VIC DE, 2025). While others had high student wellbeing outcomes but were not yet able to improve the academic outcomes of the students.

The three school research sites³ were selected for our study for being situated in metropolitan suburbs and regional centres that have markers of economic and social inequity and historically low levels of educational achievement.

- *Research Site 1: Garron Secondary College and Wiyal Primary School*

The same student cohorts from Wiyal Primary School progress to the neighbouring Garron Secondary College. In 2018, the two schools had low academic and wellbeing outcomes for students, high staff turnover, and high staff and student absenteeism. In 2019, they initiated TIPE as a specific strategy for school improvement.

2 Preparatory refers to the first year of primary school within the state where this research was conducted.

3 In line with study's ethical agreements, all school names and study participants have been de-identified.

- *Research Site 2: Muyan P-9 College*
This school has undertaken TIPE since 2016. Wellbeing outcomes for students were high and staff felt supported. The school acknowledged, though, that they were struggling to make an impact on academic outcomes for students. They continued to undertake trauma-informed leadership training and coaching to bring about further change.
- *Research Site 3: Warrak Specialist School*
TIPE emerged as the practice model within Warrak Specialist School since 2015. Warrak was the first school to explore TIPE strategies, as their students were often excluded from mainstream schooling and had complex unmet needs for learning due to impacts of trauma and adverse childhood experiences. While the school's earlier focus was on wellbeing outcomes for students, the leadership team next turned to trauma-informed instruction and leadership development as the next phase of their school improvement planning.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Participatory action research was employed for its centring of educators as co-investigators, collaboratively working through iterative cycles of planning, action, and reflection (Lewin, 1946; McNiff & Whitehead, 2006). Participatory action research helps ensure that educators' own values and priorities for student progress remain the pragmatic foundation for their participation in the studies.

Participatory action research involves a self-reflective spiral for which educators first plan an intervention, enact these plans, observe possible student outcomes, and then reflect and plan forward for the next cycle of their pedagogical delivery (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2000). It was deemed a priority to ensure that any research activities were seen as bolstering staff's pre-existing work plans to avoid their feeling like trauma-informed education was an add-on or separate to their core professional responsibilities.

To note, a special strengths-based framing of participatory action research informed the research design. In keeping with TIPE's own orientations in the wellbeing sciences, a specific adaptation was employed: appreciative inquiry participatory action research (AIPAR) (Ludema & Fry, 2008; Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008). The strengths-based AIPAR prompts educators to consider their actions from a foundation of strengths, as opposed to deficits. For example, in a deficit approach, a leader may start their own action-research cycle with a deficit question such as: *How do I fix adults who are*

exacerbating naughty student behaviour when those teachers are rupturing student interactions?

However, in an AIPAR approach, we prompted leaders in our study to state their own priorities, such as: *How do I leverage this teacher's strengths and values to better understand the unmet needs of their students?* Although the intention may be similar, AIPAR promotes a strengths-based orientation to ensure that action-research works from a place of capacity and capability building to leverage what is strong and right in campuses.

Throughout AIPAR cycles, educators were given opportunities to receive training and consultation with our research team and then were provided opportunities to *discover* stories from their classrooms and staffrooms. Through these stories they could understand the 'best of what is' to use as foundations for change, reflect together, *dream and design* together through planning, *act and observe* to note any promising practice changes, and then *plan forward towards destiny*, in which educators maintain a vision for long-term sustainability of best practices (Zandee & Cooperrider, 2008).

In addition, TIPE leadership master classes and coaching occurred during the period 2020–2024 to assist leaders with implementing and developing their trauma-informed leadership practices and approaches. Topics of these consultation meetings and activities are detailed in the following chapters and anchored by leadership concerns of enhancing all-staff consistency for TIPE strategies. This is done by gaining buy-in for staff requiring extra intervention and coaching, establishing staff-based routines for learning and reflection cycles, and analysing student data, as well as other concerns such as forging high expectations for student learning and the campus environment.

The participating leaders engaged with us from the beginning of 2019 until the end of 2024 (6 complete school years). Throughout, each site received over 4 days of professional training in which all campus staff were present, multiple leadership team consultations with the researchers who hosted opportunities for leaders to move through iterative cycles of AIPAR, and then multiple rounds of data collection and group interviews.

A leader at Wiyal Primary School described the process:

The great thing about it is, [training and consultation] occurs one day per term or semester, which allows for the strategy to really sink in.

The teachers can come back to school, they can practice it, they can ask more questions about, hey, why do we do A, B, C and D, and then they're ready for the next training and consultation day when it comes up the following term or semester.

Special Considerations for Data Collection

Given the disruption of COVID-19 and associated lockdowns, which transpired during our research, we want to provide additional description on how data were collected. Schools continually reported back to us that students who were vulnerable before the pandemic were made even more vulnerable resulting from delays in social, emotional, and learning outcomes. While the pandemic forced seismic disruption for all involved, unique opportunities also emerged to explore the positive impacts that a trauma-informed education approach could have for leaders as they navigated community trauma, unrest, and instabilities.

At Garron Secondary School and Wiyal Primary School, interviews were conducted with school leaders and teachers throughout 2019–2024. Pandemic restrictions were in place during 2020–2022, thus in-person interviews were not possible and took place online. In addition, each year the schools provided the responses to the staff and student attitudes surveys, as well as student learning assessments noting the possible impacts of COVID-19 lockdowns on any data trends and analysis.

At Muyan P-9 College, interviews were conducted with school leaders and teachers where possible during 2019–2024. COVID-19 restrictions were in place during 2020–2022 so that face-to-face interviews were not possible. Master classes and coaching sessions were recorded and analysed. In addition, from 2019 to 2021, the school survey data and student learning outcomes were impacted as above.

For Warrak Specialist School, interviews with leaders were conducted during 2020–2024. All research activity was online from 2020 to 2021, like the other schools. In addition, in 2021, the school provided the responses to the staff survey and the student attitude to school survey, as well as student reading assessment data.

Analysis occurred after all interviews were transcribed and thematically reduced for both common themes and valuable points of qualitative data, which may have been categorised as outliers from general group responses. In qualitative data analysis, both prevalent and outlying points can offer meaningful insight reflecting the contextualisation of a school's culture and community.

In summary, quantitative data collection and analysis was simultaneously occurring throughout the six years within a quasi-experimental approach – that is, student attitudes surveys (VIC DE 2025), academic growth surveys (ACARA, 2025; ACER, 2025), teacher perception surveys (VIC DET, 2021), and parent opinion surveys (VIC DE, 2024). It must be noted that throughout

our research, we were not comparing schools to one another but treating each school as a unique case study. As such, a school's findings – both qualitative and quantitative changes – were noted and compared to its own year-on-year changes. In doing so, our aim was to show unique changes occurring within schools without trying to aggregate the outcomes of different locations and education provision.

Attribution for any changes is noted by the leaders themselves. We were able to triangulate with leaders through AIPAR cycles to ensure that their own assessments were considered as to why positive changes in data may have occurred and how their own actions contributed to those changes. While we cannot claim generalisations, we suggest that future leaders can learn from these case studies.

The chapters of this book represent the progressive stages of study enactment and the discussion of findings leading to the introduction of our novel approach for trauma-informed educational leadership development: *TIEL*.

In Chapter 2, we introduce trauma-informed educational practice and the need to extend this to a trauma-informed leadership approach. Then, in Chapter 3, we review current leadership standards from educational leadership literatures to ensure that trauma-informed practices align with the professional standard and well-established leadership progression points that many Australian leaders use as their own benchmarks. In Chapters 4–8, we introduce the findings of our research and suggest promising practices and strategies, including implications for instructional delivery, staff wellbeing, school climate, physical learning environments of the campuses, and parent and carer engagement, with added innovation arising from systems-aware practices. To conclude, in Chapter 9, we draw from the mosaic of our findings and discussion to highlight a novel approach to trauma-informed practice for leaders. Our goal is that this will provide provocation for our discipline to iteratively build on and expand *TIEL* to unique communities and cultural contexts around Australia and across the world.