

# Guest editorial: Trauma informed qualitative inquiry methodologies

357

This special issue on trauma-informed methodologies highlights teaching and learning approaches that embed trauma-sensitive care as central to transformative educational environments. In a constantly changing global landscape marked by natural disasters, political violence and rising civil unrest, there is an urgent need to recognise the significance of trauma-informed perspectives (Archer, 2017; Howard, 2013). Developing trauma-aware positionalities is essential for building transformative societies and vibrant communities (Matlin *et al.*, 2019; Perry and Winfrey, 2021). Judith Howard, a recognised world authority on trauma-informed practice, reminds us of the centrality of embedding trauma-aware approaches in our work with individuals who have experienced trauma in their daily lives. She makes note of the long-lasting impacts of trauma and the devastating effects of unresolved trauma on people's mental health and well-being. Howard draws attention to the role of neuroscience and trauma-sensitive frameworks of practice that promote and create pathways for resilience building and healing from trauma. Howard's (2018, p. 3) reflections on this theme are captured below,

trauma-aware education is grounded on the premise – whilst the very plastic or malleable nature of the child or adolescent brain leaves young people quite vulnerable to neural, health, and mental health impact of trauma – there is great hope, as neural repair can be achieved through informed and consistent practices to address harm.

Researchers such as Levine (2024), Herman (2015) and Van der Kolk (2015) explore the important role of nurturing relationships in healing embodied pain that results from traumatic adverse childhood experiences (Boullier and Blair, 2018; Felitti *et al.*, 1998). They also explore the impact of intergenerational trauma (Lee *et al.*, 2023; O'Neill *et al.*, 2018), collective trauma (Konanur and Muller, 2024; Rubio *et al.*, 2025) and colonisation (Atkinson, 2002; Bhabha, 2004) on the lives of marginalised and disadvantaged communities and families. Breaking the cycle of trauma requires a trauma-informed approach that is supported by government bodies, political leaders, allied health professionals and systemic structures. Disrupting trauma trails comes when there is a crafting of “healing spaces” and in the presence of “sanctuary models” that offer trauma-sensitive care (Aitkinson, 2013; Bloom, 1995; Esaki *et al.*, 2013). Drawing attention to systems, policies, practices, ideologies, languages and behaviours that seek to marginalise and disadvantage survivors of trauma is indeed a necessary step in the achievement of post-traumatic growth (Prescod and Zeligman, 2018).

Hope and self-actualisation emerge when an individual's potential is seen, affirmed and valued despite the circumstances that accompany one's life story. Teachers, social workers, psychologists and counsellors, who celebrate people's stories of courage and resilience amidst encounters of sexual abuse, neglect, domestic violence, exclusion, poverty, disability and homelessness, create opportunities for heightened ways of being and becoming in the world. Trauma survivors are at their best when they are surrounded by people, systems and policies that reduce further harm and promote higher flourishing.

The articles presented in this special issue investigate barriers and enablers to trauma-sensitive models of practice. The authors recognise the essentiality of making public qualities of trauma advocates who are committed to disrupting, provoking and spitting out bad behaviour that perpetuates cycles of disadvantage and oppression. Concurrently, the writers use metaphors and narratives to engage in storytelling that captures meaningful moments in time. Vicars (2025) uses storytelling in his article to “peel back” layers of understanding to evoke the copious ways we come to know the fabric of our lives. His article explores storytelling as a vehicle for resistance and armour against gayness, queerness,



heteronormativity and otherness. In recounting the story of his gay friend Dan, we come to understand the impact of childhood abandonment. Vicars retells a series of events in Dan's life history that isolate him from his cultural roots and loved ones. Dan's mother was forcibly placed in a mental institution by his father. He and his sister were placed into an orphanage by his father, who wanted a free life and the choice to do as he pleased. Despite Dan's struggles with identity, sexuality and familial ties, we see the important role that his English teacher played in helping him to feel worthy of academic success. In Dan's words, "My English teacher encouraged me to take an interest in literature and read well-written books. He paid me attention and encouraged my reading . . . He steered me in a direction where I began to develop a strong sense of belonging to a community". Having at least one advocate who is committed to offering emotional and spiritual support during times of traumatic upheaval can pave the way for healing and transformation.

[Broadbent-Hogan \(2025\)](#), a school principal at an alternative flexible learning school, recounts her interactions with school students who have lived through complex trauma. She articulates qualities of trauma-informed classroom environments and argues for school-wide trauma-informed frameworks of practice. Broadbent-Hogan's professional journal entries identify common negative emotions that are felt by young people who have experienced extreme trauma. Feelings of vulnerability and shame are often experienced by school students who are labelled as dysfunctional and broken. In one diary extract, Broadbent-Hogan brings to the reader's attention what a deregulated human spirit looks like. We come to understand how feelings of helplessness and hopelessness inhibit proactive student responses to challenging schooling moments. We see this in her journal entry below:

Student began crying and rocking in the corner whilst asking repeatedly if he hurt staff and then stating that he wished he could just be normal and didn't know what was wrong with him (Journal Entry March 15th, 2022).

Language/phrases, school policies, pedagogical strategies and curriculum design can also re-trigger students who arrive at school dysregulated and emotionally unstable. Teachers unaware of or ambivalent about the signs and symptoms of trauma can often misinterpret students' behaviours. Broadbent-Hogan is committed to equipping teachers and youth workers with the necessary skills and knowledge needed to deliver trauma-sensitive care. She presents ten key strategies for "creating trauma-informed learning" environments. These strategies offer readers a roadmap to the creation, facilitation and sustenance of agentic trauma-sensitive learning environments.

[Smith et al. \(2025\)](#) explore the impact of a compulsory trauma unit of study on youth work students and youth work graduates. Their data findings highlight the importance of having skilled youth work teachers who can draw on current experiences in the utilisation of trauma-aware practices. Being able to link professional experiences with trauma-informed frameworks was seen as enhancing youth work student learning. Another factor that enhanced youth work students' understandings of effective trauma-informed approaches was the use of role-plays in situating trauma-informed practice. One of the youth work students in their study reflected on the value of role-plays in teaching trauma education content in the following way.

Yes, there is no way you can work in youth work if you don't understand trauma. You will think it is just bad behaviour, but there is a reason why a young person is who they are and behaves in the way they do. I think we can do more role plays in the course to make sure that students know what to do when they get to the workplace.

The authors interrogate additional data themes such as "understanding the role of empathy, compassion and character strengths when working with young people whose lives have been impacted by trauma". Their paper builds on the seminal work of [Perry and Winfrey \(2021\)](#) and [Van der Kolk \(2015\)](#), who argue for the need for empathy and compassion when interacting with individuals who have experienced intense pain and suffering. Moreover, Smith, van der

Klashorst and Cacciattolo make the point that youth work curriculum components must include professional self-care that can mitigate the impact of vicarious trauma. Providing youth work graduates with strategies to prevent burnout and compassion fatigue can lower attrition rates in the youth work profession.

Trauma-informed insights, strategies and practices for decolonising research and research education are themes explored by [Marsh and Spencer \(2025\)](#) in their article. They contend that trauma-informed research recognises that “mainstream academy is steeped in a tradition of overlooking and excluding First Nations” intellectual and cultural knowledge, and this is compounded by the prevalence of white privilege within the academy’. Like [Vicars \(2025\)](#), Marsh and Spencer assert the importance of storytelling as a vehicle for trauma healing. Privileging First Nations stories that disrupt and challenge colonial practices that endorse ethnocentrism and western epistemologies is an important aim of this article. The authors also call to account the role of the “Academy” in not providing culturally safe learning environments that respond to First Nations protocols and procedures. Protecting First Nations Higher Degree Research students from witnessing and experiencing further acts of colonisation can prevent re-traumatisation. Marsh’s recount of her own doctoral journey further evidences a need for the privileging of Indigenous epistemologies and perspectives that celebrate Indigenous-centred research. Spencer, a psychologist specialising in trauma recovery and narrative therapy, reports on a need for the inclusion of “trauma-informed coregulation practices” that enhance emotional safety and “give voice and empowerment to lived experiences of colonial trauma”.

[Gonzalez \(2025\)](#), in his article, examines the intersections between trauma-informed methodologies, educational professional learning and the education of migrant English Language Learners (ELLs). His study is situated within a socio-political context of American global migration policies aligned with the constant “looming presence of immigration and customs enforcement (ICE)”. Gonzalez explores the reflections of twelve preservice teachers who participated in professional development workshops. The workshops centred on trauma-informed teaching and learning approaches that included “brain breaks”, “mindful transitions” and “establishing consistent routines”. Gonzalez’s research also highlights challenges that educators often face in the implementation of certain types of trauma-informed practices. He references difficulties in co-developing individualised student support plans and coordinating cross-disciplinary trauma response teams when educators have “caseloads of over 100 students”. Other challenges presented in the application of trauma-sensitive practices are linked to the assumption that there is a one-size-fits-all approach. Not all ELLs have experienced trauma, and as Gonzalez attests, “trauma-informed strategies should not be conflated with culturally responsive pedagogy or language development scaffolding”. According to the author, a tiered approach to trauma-informed practice can help educators to select certain types of meaningful support with specific student needs.

[Arantes \(2025\)](#) interrogates qualitative research articles that focus on K-12 teachers’ lived experiences of cyber abuse that has emerged through student postings on the Internet. She makes the point that “the problematisation of teacher-targeted cyberbullying is under-researched” and in need of further study. This is despite an increase in viral online posts by students who seek to ridicule, undermine and humiliate their teachers through a range of cyberbullying tactics. Arantes references national and international research from countries such as South Africa, Egypt, America, Israel and Nepal. Themes such as vicarious trauma, secondary stress and compassion fatigue are discussed in connection to distressing emotions that many teachers encounter when observing online violent acts that target their colleagues. Readers are also informed of the role of the eSafety Commissioner and the Online Safety Act, which includes Basic Online Safety Expectations (BOSE). Of importance to the reader is an awareness of the Australian Government’s expectations of the incorporation of legislation, policies, systems and processes that protect people from experiencing online harm.

Trauma-informed research approaches recognise a need for researchers to be trauma-sensitive when working with people who have experienced trauma in their daily lives

(Campbell *et al.*, 2019; Goodwin and Tiderington, 2022). For example, when interviewing survivors of sexual abuse, domestic violence, political violence and intergenerational trauma, interviewers must engage in culturally sensitive, trauma-informed research protocols. According to MacDonald *et al.* (2024, p. 2) “trauma-informed approaches to research and evaluation prioritise safety, sharing power/control and trust, while aiming to reduce the likelihood of retraumatisation”. Ensuring that participants feel a sense of safety and trust when telling their stories is essential in all types of research. This is especially the case when stories reveal emotions of guilt, fear, shame and sadness. Virella and Woulfin (2025) present interview protocols and techniques that researchers can use when interviewing participants who have been impacted by trauma. The authors report on a research project that was conducted with educational leaders who were asked to reflect on how they had experienced a crisis event. The authors understand the importance of empathetic engagement when listening to participants who share stories of events that are stressful and distressing. Of importance is their commitment to guiding researchers to consider sensitive interview practices that ensure that participants are supported when sharing traumatic life histories.

For many people across the globe, the COVID-19 pandemic was a time of intense isolation that involved separation from friends, family and loved ones (al Hussaini *et al.*, 2025). For individuals in faith-based communities, COVID-19 meant a disassociation from spaces and places that provided comfort and spiritual wellbeing. Joseph and Hyde (2025) share stories of participants who, when interviewed, spoke of the importance of attending online religious community services during the global pandemic. Interviewees also discussed the benefit of attending virtual Bible studies and prayer meetings that provided opportunities to connect and reconnect with people in meaningful ways. Their article is an important reminder of the positive impact that virtual communities have had and continue to have on enhancing wellbeing and life satisfaction for their members. The researchers highlight that “faith-based discussions with others were often a significant spiritual resource for building resilience during the pandemic”. Consideration is also given to other activities that helped to enhance the quality of life for people during lockdown. These included engagement with outdoor activities, connecting with community through technology, pursuing leisure activities and pursuing leisure. The Positive Emotion, Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment (PERMA) model created by Seligman (2011) is used as a framework for understanding wellbeing amongst the participants in their study.

At the heart of this special issue is a desire to rethink how trauma-informed practices are enacted in educational and research-based contexts. Responses to trauma-informed models of practice consider political, cultural, historical and structural forces that seek to disadvantage trauma survivors even further (Mills, 1970). When enacting a trauma-aware mindset, people affected by trauma are viewed through a lens of compassion and empathy (Stark *et al.*, 2022). The authors in this special issue bring to the forefront transformative and innovative strategies that help to build this lens.

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