Embracing trauma-informed practice in Aotearoa New Zealand schools: The perspectives of those at the coalface

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ABSTRACT

'Trauma-informed' is fast becoming a buzzword, a term being used widely across health, education, and other sectors. Online technologies are enabling an increasing number of schools to have instant access to 'expert' trauma-informed approaches, practices and research, however, the ways in which this information is being used varies greatly. This professional inquiry explores educators' perceptions of the enablers of implementing sustainable, culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches in Aotearoa schools. It details the narrative inquiry and semi-structured interviews used to collect the perspectives of six school tumuaki (principals) in a diverse range of schools including urban, rural, low socio-economic and bilingual. Themes mirror both international and Aotearoa research of systems change in schools by identifying leadership, vision, inclusive culture, and innovation as the key levers in providing a trauma-informed inclusive education approach based on strengths-based, mana-preserving, culturally responsive practice.

KEYWORDS

Trauma-informed practice, trauma-informed approaches, relational neuroscience, systems change

Rationale

We are living in unprecedented times of pandemic, war, climate change and times of immense unpredictability. The way people deal with these situations is coming under the spotlight, particularly when developing an understanding of trauma. International and national data indicate increasing levels of students displaying disruptive behaviour in schools, increased levels of teacher burnout, and decreased levels of engagement in learning (Brunzell et al., 2021; Education Counts, 2022; Oberg et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019). Education settings are beginning to explore trauma-informed practice and develop an awareness and understanding of neuroscience and the brain-body connection. To date, there has been very little research into the enablers of implementing sustainable trauma-

informed approaches in Aotearoa schools. This professional inquiry sets out to gather narratives of educators with a focus on answering the following research question.

Research question

What are educators' perspectives on the key enablers of implementing sustainable trauma-informed approaches, practices, and systems, in Aotearoa schools?

Terminology

For this inquiry, the term 'trauma-informed approaches' is used to describe relational approaches incorporating trauma-informed understanding and practice, and an awareness of neuroscience and nervous systems responses.

Review of the evidence base

Setting the scene

Trauma can be defined as exposure to an event that involves real or perceived threat or injury to oneself or others, or death, and which causes feelings of intense fear, horror, and helplessness, that can impede one's ability to function adaptively (APA, 2013; SAMHSA, 2014). For many children and communities impacted by trauma, school is the most stable, consistent, and predictable environment in their lives. Due to the significant amount of time children spend in school, educators and other school personnel can play a vital role in supporting and mitigating the ongoing effects of trauma and increasing well-being by using trauma-informed relational approaches (Brunzell et al., 2018; Miller & Berger, 2022). In recent years, there has been an increasing drive for trauma-informed education as a way of narrowing the achievement gap and addressing the school-to-prison pipeline (Dorado et al., 2016; Hulvershorn & Mulholland, 2018), acknowledging and mitigating the harm and hurt caused by colonisation on indigenous cultures (Berger & Martin, 2022; Miller & Berger, 2022; Pihama et al., 2014; Pihama et al., 2017), and supporting better life outcomes for marginalised communities including disabled, refugee, and indigenous people (Berger, 2019; McVilly et al., 2022).

Origins of trauma-informed practice

Originating in the 1970s as a care approach to support veterans returning from the Vietnam War, trauma-informed practice is a term relatively new to the Westernised education system and is based on an emerging body of knowledge in the fields of neuroscience and psychology. These emerging findings have led experts to explore social theories, gaining insights into attachment (Bowlby, 1969), the influence of experiences and environments on well-being (Delahooke, 2019), and the effects of trauma on children's ongoing development (APA, 2013; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Technological advances have facilitated the identification of neuroplasticity (the brain's capacity to change throughout life) and the understanding of how neuroplasticity aids in healing and recovery from trauma, through individualised and universal trauma-informed approaches. These advances contribute to an understanding of how positive nurturing environments can promote healthy brain changes by providing the necessary conditions for individuals to feel safe and supported. They also

contribute to a greater understanding of the positive impacts that lifelong learning and growth play in the trauma recovery process (Delahooke, 2019; Howard, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; SAMHSA, 2014).

As our knowledge of child development and the potential impact of trauma evolves, so does our recognition of the healing potential of relationships. According to Wansleeben et al. (2013), trauma-sensitive approaches are crucial for promoting healing and resilience in children who have experienced trauma. Due to the plasticity of the developing human brain during childhood, research in the field of neuroscience reveals that a trauma-informed response throughout the school years offers a window of opportunity to undo the damage caused by complex trauma (Delahooke, 2019; Howard, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006).

Impacts of trauma

Trauma overwhelms the brain beyond its ability to function and can trigger physiological, emotional, and psychological reactions. Trauma can be a one-off event such as a natural disaster, a collection of events such as ongoing physical violence in the home, collective events such as the COVID-19 pandemic, or intergenerational such as the effects of colonisation on Māori in Aotearoa (Pihama et al., 2017; Te Pou, 2023). According to Van der Kolk (2014) "trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body" (p. 21). Everyone experiences trauma differently. This is illustrated by responses to natural disasters where communities experience the same event, yet the impacts of this trauma affect some people in insignificant ways, yet paralyse others (Liberty, 2017; Mutch, 2014, 2022; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006; Van der Kolk, 2014). The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA, 2014) explains this as the three 'E's' of trauma: events, experience and effects (p. 8).

Trauma and adversity can happen on a continuum where small pieces of adversity have the potential to cumulate to become significant trauma in the brain (APA, 2013; Desautels, 2016; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Experiencing trauma can have both immediate and longer-term effects and can change one's future life pathways (Berger & Martin, 2022; Downey, 2012; Greig et al., 2021; Van der Kolk, 2009). Many factors can compound trauma including long-standing educational inequity, community devastation, racism, colonisation, and generational poverty (Greig et al., 2021; Liberty, 2017; Savage et al., 2012). Trauma activates the body's autonomic stress response system and can trigger neurological states exhibiting as fight, flight, or freeze (De Bellis & Zisk, 2014) which can lead to increased difficulty engaging with learning, and difficulty regulating emotions and behaviours (Berger, 2019; Oberg et al., 2023). When brains are in these states, and when excessive cognitive demands are placed upon the students exceeding that student's ability to respond adaptively (Desautels, 2016; Greene & Haynes, 2021; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006), challenges can arise in classrooms and schools. This can ultimately lead to time out of education through stand-downs, suspensions, and exclusions, or heightened anxiety about entering and staying in the learning environment due to a limited sense of control and belonging (Dorado et al., 2016). Exclusion can then create layers of trauma for individuals, their families, teachers, and the community. Studies identify significant correlations between school attendance and achievement (Education Counts, 2022; Savage et al., 2012). Trauma has a flow-on effect of low academic achievement, fewer employment opportunities,

less financial security, and higher statistics around incarceration and poor health outcomes (Brunzell et al., 2021; Hughes et al., 2017; Walsh et al., 2019).

Trauma-informed and trauma-aware schools

The terms *trauma-informed schools* and *trauma-aware schools* describe schools that have opted to engage in full-school approaches to trauma (Berger, 2019; Greig et al., 2021; Howard, 2019). The term 'trauma-informed practice' is defined by Quadara and Hunter (2016) as "frameworks and strategies to ensure that the practices, policies and culture of an organisation, and its staff, understand, recognise and respond to the effects of trauma on client wellbeing and behaviour" (p. 11). A trauma-informed or trauma-aware school is one in which the impacts of trauma are understood (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006) and problematic behaviours are viewed as heightened stress response activation, rather than being viewed as intentional or punishable actions (Harvard University Center on the Developing Child, 2023). Within trauma-informed approaches, neuroscience-informed systems change strategies are implemented creating safe and biologically respectful environments (Desautels, 2016; Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016) with a focus on preventing trauma and re-traumatisation, and teaching strategies to support healing (Delahooke, 2019; Greene & Haynes, 2021; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Trauma-informed practice is underpinned by six key principles: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration and mutuality, empowerment, voice and choice, and cultural, historical, and gender identity (Berger & Quiros, 2014; Muskett, 2014; SAMHSA, 2014).

In contrast to trauma-aware approaches, historically, many popular approaches to classroom management were underpinned by behaviourist theories, with behaviour being considered to be goal-driven or attention-seeking, and incentives and consequences being used to shape the behaviour with motivation being the key factor (Savage et al., 2011). Trauma-informed approaches, in contrast, presume the child 'can't do' rather than 'won't do' something, acknowledging how trauma and a rewired autonomic nervous system may make it harder to regulate emotions, and highlighting the importance of supportive relationships in an environment focused on emotional safety and developing skills (Greene & Haynes, 2021).

Advances and kaupapa Māori

Within the Aotearoa context, kaupapa Māori and trauma-informed approaches are similar with both being grounded by connection, holistic approaches to healing, and recognising that trauma impacts a person's whole self (McLachlan et al., 2023). A framework conceptualising health and well-being, Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1998), reflects four interconnected elements of health and well-being that stem from Māori value systems (Jackson et al., 2018, as cited in Denston et al., 2022; McLachlan et al., 2023): *taha tinana* (physical health), *taha wairua* (spiritual health), *taha whānau* (family health), and *taha hinengaro* (mental health). Just as trauma-informed approaches identify the interconnection between mental, physical, relational and environmental well-being, this framework acknowledges that all elements need to balance for true well-being to be in place.

From a Maōri perspective, one's sense of balance and harmony is impacted by trauma, as it is understood as harm to *tapu* (sacredness) and *mauri* (spiritual life force) (Berger & Martin, 2022),

damaging personal and collective well-being. Trauma to an individual is trauma to their *whakapapa* (a line of descent from ancestors down to the present day), just as trauma to their whakapapa is trauma to the individual today. "Historical trauma can be viewed as a 'soul wound,' which sits at the core of generations of Indigenous suffering" (Pihama et al., 2017, p. 1). There have been minimal studies into in-school trauma support for Māori students. For Māori, colonisation caused loss of land, self-determination, *reo* (language), and societal structure and support, creating devastating intergenerational trauma that can still be seen today. Four key components of any trauma-informed approaches for Māori are: acknowledging and understanding historical trauma, the centrality of Māori culture and identity, recognition of the *wairua* (spiritual) impacts of trauma, and understanding and acknowledging privilege (Berger & Martin, 2022; Menschner & Maul, 2016; Pihama et al., 2017).

The need for trauma-aware educators

Quality relational connections between educators and students can enhance neurological functioning, improve behaviour, and increase general well-being and academic success for traumatised students (Bowlby, 1969; Delahooke, 2019; Downey et al., 2012; Howard, 2019; Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). In studies by Bishop and Berryman (2006), whānau members regarded their children's interactions with teachers as the most important influence on their educational attainment and well-being. Most teachers will at some stage teach children who are impacted by trauma. Studies reveal that approximately 60% of children in the US may be impacted by trauma (García et al., 2020). Following the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic and the impacts of climate change on weather patterns, emerging research is suggesting these figures could be similar or greater across Westernised countries including Aotearoa (Kira et al., 2021; Mutch, 2022; Walsh et al., 2020). For teachers to be able to support trauma-impacted students, they need to have an understanding of trauma and the neuroscience behind how trauma affects cognitive and emotional development (Oberg et al., 2023).

In the past two decades, there has been an increasing push to utilise trauma-informed, systematic approaches across all care and education sectors worldwide (Quadara & Hunter, 2016). Howard (2019) notes that trauma-informed practice in Australian sectors supporting youth, including education, is "enthusiastic but emergent and piecemeal, and there is a lack of publicly available, coordinated material on frameworks under development" (p. 546).

In every school, there are children, teachers and school personnel who would benefit from system-wide trauma-informed approaches (Howard, 2019). Researchers note that trauma-informed practice in schools needs to be focused on individual contexts and existing cross-sector systems, and not centred solely on student outcomes (Brunzell et al., 2016; Greig et al., 2021). Effective trauma-informed practice requires alignment with the six key principles of a trauma-informed approach, and systematic change at all levels of an organisation (SAMHSA, 2014). Hodas (2006) notes that barriers to initiating and sustaining effective trauma-informed practice may include organisational culture, lack of collective uptake, limited systematic structure and support, and nominal culturally responsive pedagogy.

An opportunity for Aotearoa

In Aotearoa, the implementation of trauma-informed approaches in schools is rapidly evolving. The speed at which individual schools are taking up these approaches outweighs the speed at which government policies can move, meaning we have a unique opportunity to design grassroots, Te Ao Māori-informed approaches, rather than racing to adapt what's flying in from overseas. There is a need for the gathering of practice-based evidence situated in Aotearoa. When thinking about school systems and approaches, S. Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2013) caution against a reliance on evidence-based practice that is designed without Māori context or is irrelevant to Māori. In Aotearoa, Māori must have the opportunity to lead and partner in the development of all trauma-informed and culturally responsive approaches for Māori school students (Berger & Martin, 2022; Pihama et al., 2017). The importance of practitioner cultural competence, and the deliberate enabling of authentic iwi, hapū and whānau partnerships and relationships, with and between Māori and non-Māori practitioners, is integral within He Ritenga Whaimōhio: A Framework to Guide culturally responsive Evidence-Based Practice, which incorporates three concepts highly regarded by Māori: "*tika* (right, true, correct), *pono* (fair, just, honest) and *aroha* (care, compassion, love)" (S. Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013, p. 72).

In contrast to health and other sectors, education has yet to adopt a whole-of-organisation trauma-informed strategy (Howard, 2019). Even within the Aotearoa health sector, there is limited recognition of the relevance of culturally responsive trauma-informed care approaches and frameworks; without these components, the frameworks fail to provide for indigenous experiences of collective, historical, and intergenerational trauma (Pihama et al., 2017; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022). Whilst everyone uniquely experiences trauma, Māori populations are more likely to experience it in ways that are specifically linked to colonisation, racism, discrimination, historical negative stereotyping, inequitable access to education, and increasing rates of violence, poverty, and poor health outcomes (Bishop & Berryman 2006; Pihama et al., 2017; Te Pou, 2023). These additional layers of trauma must be acknowledged and understood when shaping trauma-informed education and well-being frameworks, knowledge and pedagogies in Aotearoa (Pihama et al., 2017; Waitoki & McLachlan, 2022) by drawing on the "indigenous realities'' (S. Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2013, p. 66). S. Macfarlane and Macfarlane (2013) have identified six key themes for culturally responsive education, *Mātauranga Māori* (knowledge and wisdom pertaining to Māori), *whanaungatanga* (developing relationships), *rangatiratanga* (the centrality of self-awareness), research in context and the centrality of relevance, honouring Te Tiriti with the centrality of power-sharing, and cultural competency and the centrality of enabling potential (p. 66).

Although the evaluation of non-health-based trauma-informed interventions in schools is limited, emerging studies show that schools can successfully use these interventions to prevent or mitigate the effects of trauma (Desautels, 2016; Jaycox et al., 2009; Liberty, 2017). Many complex and dynamic factors compound the impacts of trauma in our society today, requiring school leaders to develop a greater depth of understanding of systematic aware perspectives and practice (Greig et al., 2021). Trauma-informed practices do not stand alone and need to be part of the greater school, community, and countrywide ecosystems. The need for cross-sector training and responses is critical to sustained, effective trauma-informed practice (Howard, 2019).

Methodology

Research design

This participatory research gathered qualitative data (Miles & Huberman, 1994) using a narrative professional inquiry design (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) honouring *mātauranga Māori* with a focus on *whanaungatanga* and learning through *pūrākau* (personal and cultural narratives that are encoded with a rich resource of mātauranga Māori). Semi-structured interviews allowed interviews to be participant-led and encouraged a natural story-telling flow.

Before research commencement, the interview design and methodology were peer and lecturer reviewed, ahead of seeking and gaining ethics approval through a Massey University (2017) low-risk ethics application. The ethical stance of the researcher was to conduct this project in a mana-preserving manner, capturing and foregrounding participants' ideas, rather than focusing on individuals.

Participants

Within this research, the broad term 'educators' was used to include staff within a school, including tumuaki, deputy and assistant tumuaki, SENCos, Learning Support Coordinators, deans, pastoral care leads, kaiako, occupational therapists and educational psychologists. Participants were educators employed within Aotearoa schools who self-identified or had been nominated as being the people pivotal in the school's trauma-informed journey and had determined that their school environment and practice were informed by relational neuroscience and trauma-informed approaches. As part of the selection criteria, participants needed to be available for a one-hour interview and were required to gain permission from their Board of Trustees, school tumuaki or other relevant leadership team members before participating.

The first six educators available for an interview were selected for the research. Collectively, this group were Māori and non-Māori tumuaki who led primary schools across the North and South Island and had 1-7 years' experience of implementing trauma-informed approaches in rural and urban schools.

Data collection and analysis

I conducted semi-structured interviews via the Zoom online platform. Participants were invited to select interview times that suited them, with interviews ranging in length from 35 minutes to 120 minutes. Interviews were recorded and transcribed via AI platforms of Zoom and Otter AI. Participants had the right to refuse to answer any questions.

Following the data collection, thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to identify the main themes within and across the interviews. Themes were coded and grouped, before being analysed as part of the final professional inquiry summary. Pertinent quotes were extracted from the data and used to strengthen the body of knowledge being shared in the final summary. Participants' contributions and identity remained anonymous within this body of work.

Findings and discussion

Transformative action requires a shift in perception, alignment with values, and active engagement (Mehmood et al., 2019). The blending of transformative learning with relational neuroscience and trauma-informed approaches through a Te Ao Maōri lens can lead to a paradigm shift in education today.

Five distinct themes emerged from the data, explaining the perceived enablers of implementing relational and trauma-informed approaches within Aotearoa schools.

1. System disruption – challenging the status quo
2. Leadership and vision
3. A journey of discovery – culturally inclusive, mana-preserving, and strengths-based practice
4. Far-reaching benefits for all – the centrality of connections, relationships, and well-being
5. Sustainability of practice

These themes not only reflect international and national literature but also contribute a uniquely Aotearoa perspective on the key ingredients of trauma-informed schools.

System disruption – Challenging the status quo

Identifying that things weren't working, was the catalyst for participants to explore how things could be done differently. Participants reported that student behaviour had increased to an all-time high, and stand-down and exclusion rates were increasing steeply. Student engagement was low, with many participants reporting that their teachers felt that they were spending more time out of the classroom managing behaviour, than actually in the classroom teaching. Teacher stress and burnout was increasing. Several participants were concerned about teacher retention, with many teachers leaving the profession citing well-being as their number one reason for their exit. As one participant stated, "We knew that if we just kept doing things the same way we had always been doing things, we would just get the same results" (Participant D).

Looking to current government policy and ministerial support led to a realisation that looking outwards was not going to bring the support that was needed directly for the students, or for the school leadership and teachers. As one participant stated, "We realised that the cavalry wasn't coming" (Participant B). It was this realisation that became the impetus that if change was going to happen, it needed to come from within. "We realised that the 'system' was broken. We then started to see that we 'were' the system. We took control. We had to rely on ourselves" (Participant D).

> Movements are frequently thought to begin with a call to action. However, movement research indicates that they begin with emotion: a generalised sense of unhappiness with the current state of affairs and a belief that the institutions and power structures of society would not be able to solve the issue. When someone speaks up with a constructive vision and a way forward that the majority can support, the simmering discontent becomes a movement. (Summary of Walker & Soule, 2017, as cited in Massey University, 2023)

Leadership and vision

The participants in this research described their driving factor as knowing in their hearts that this was the right thing to do. They talked of needing to be brave on this journey, standing by their convictions, and having to be innovative and creative. This was especially true whilst navigating an education system they described as being steeped in Western colonial foundations (Pihama et al., 2017), and favouring a social and emotional construct of behaviour situated within behaviourist theories.

'Vision' was a term that was used often in interviews. The knowledge that things could and would change for the better was described by participants as the motivation that kept them going when things were tough. As one participant explained, "We listened to what our instincts were saying" (Participant A).

The participants talked of the internal strength they found as they embarked on this journey of discovery.

> We knew in our hearts that this was the right thing to do. It was about leading with compassion, standing by our convictions, and being brave. I would lie awake at night thinking about the changes and the challenges – especially around how we were going to fund this, yet it was our collective drive to make things better for our tamariki that energised and motivated me not to give up. It didn't take long for everyone in the school to be in the waka with us. (Participant D)

Mindset, willingness to give things a go, and being open to change were all themes that the participants talked about their staff developing during this journey. "The more we learned, the more we knew that we were already doing lots of those things intuitively. The professional learning gave us the words to use to describe what we were doing intuitively" (Participant A).

Journey of discovery – Culturally inclusive, mana-preserving, and strengths-based practice

Within Aotearoa, it is vitally important that the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi are central to our actions and our way of being (A. Macfarlane et al., 2017; Pihama et al., 2017). The participants in this inquiry talked about how any practice or approach that was implemented in their schools needed to be aligned with the cultural values of the school, be strengths-based and mana-preserving. Relational approaches informed by trauma-informed practice and neuroscience hold connections, relationships and safety at the core.

> As Māori, so much of what I do pulls from Te Ao Māori. You know, if you look at it from a Te Ao Maori view this knowledge is already in me. I already have it. It's just been unlocked by learning about the brain-body connection and what trauma can do to us all. (Participant A)

Self-learning was noted as a key instrument of systems change. Educators started to look inward and learn about their own physiological responses to stress and trauma as they learned more about trauma-informed practice.

> I had begun to read about Trauma-Informed Approaches and had reached out to another tumuaki who I knew was also travelling on this journey. They had conducted a book study with their staff, and it was proving to be instrumental in the change in adult attitudes and willingness to be open to learning. So I went back to my staff, and we discussed doing the same. Most were keen(ish) as long as it was not an 'extra'. The BOT and I prioritised this learning, meaning we threw out all the other planned PLD [professional learning development] for the year and focused solely on developing our understanding of trauma and relational neuroscience. The book study was incredibly powerful … right from the first session. We invited our full staff including our teacher aides and caretaker. This learning was about ALL of us. (Participant B)

Recognising that their teachers could not continue to add more onto an already crowded role, the tumuaki shared their commitment to prioritising trauma-informed PLD and clearing the decks of other PLD. The participants all described a tide of change as the professional learning was progressing and they were learning more about themselves and their own stress reactions. They started to see a change in the ways they were now responding to, rather than reacting to, behaviour. Some staff were early adopters, and others took longer, "Some staff had difficulty shifting traditional mindsets – authority meant everything to them" (Participant C).

Participants in this professional inquiry shared their school's journey of discovery. Despite feeling 'alone' in this journey, they found common ground in seeking similar professional learning for their staff. At the time of this research, participants noted that they felt they were trailblazers with only a few other schools on a similar path to becoming trauma-informed in everything that they did. Rural participants stressed the importance of learning from those who had already implemented these approaches. "We knew it was not going to be an overnight fix, and we knew we needed to talk the challenges through with others who had walked this journey ahead of us" (Participant E). They likened it to seeking expertise from trained mechanics when fixing a car, emphasising the blend of theory and practice from experienced practitioners.

Participants emphasised the importance of tailoring approaches to fit Aotearoa contexts rather than adopting them wholesale from international sources. They recognised the need to weave together various elements to create a culturally relevant approach, acknowledging the diversity of trauma interpretations and healing methods across cultures. Trauma-informed approaches recognise that different cultures have different interpretations of trauma and different approaches to healing, however, highlight the importance of cultural identity within the process (Pihama et al., 2017). While some sought support from Australia, they stressed the importance of adapting knowledge to suit local needs and indigenous knowledge. "You have to make this your own, especially looking to our indigenous knowledge in Aotearoa – we talked to our community, we talked to our people" (Participant F). This contextual relevance was demonstrated through various actions such as redesigning school values, implementing soft starts, employing play therapists, increasing outdoor play, incorporating rhythmic brain breaks, and removing the school bell to reflect real-life contexts.

Research has highlighted the importance of all school staff, not just teachers, being trained in trauma-informed approaches (Anderson et al., 2015; Dorado et al., 2016; Ministry of Education,

2022). Teachers who have had the opportunity to be part of direct instruction and high-quality training in trauma-informed practices rate higher levels of personal well-being and resilience when supporting the students in their classes (Brunzell et al., 2021; Oberg et al., 2023). Howard (2019) notes that research findings indicate that teachers and school personnel who have had trauma-informed training develop the self-efficacy that they can make a difference, and they show more understanding of behaviour and are less likely to use punitive behaviour management strategies such as exclusion. These sentiments were reflected within this professional inquiry project with participating school leaders reporting a more inclusive, positive staff culture, and less teacher burnout.

One participant said that the moment that they realised that this relational approach was working, was when they realised that children were no longer being sent to the senior leadership team for 'behaviour issues' and the leadership and admin office was quiet. "It suddenly dawned on me that the reason I was having more time to visit classrooms and have conversations with people around the school, was because I was spending less time dealing with behaviour and stressed out teachers" (Participant D). Another participant reflected that one monumental shift in practice had been in a specific teacher who was very "shouty". Although this had been repeatedly pointed out to the individual, it wasn't until this person started to learn about the autonomic nervous systems and the body's brain and body response to stress, that this shouting stopped. "Now THIS teacher is the one that pulls up anyone else who might be using a heightened voice, and reminds them of what it [shouting] is doing to the brain" (Participant C).

Far-reaching benefits for all – The centrality of connections, relationships, and well-being

Participants emphasised that a relational and trauma-informed approach benefits everyone, not just those who may have experienced trauma. This revelation was a surprise noted by 83% of the participants. "We knew this would be better for the students, but we really didn't even think of the potential benefits for the adults" (Participant F).

One participant noted that the identifiable benefits went way beyond the school gates. Improved health outcomes for children (including a substantial decrease in hospitalisation for skin conditions) was an unexpected benefit that the participant discovered when searching through Ministry of Health data for their region. As part of the trauma-informed approach at two of the schools, *mara kai* (growing your own food) had been introduced. This connection to Papatūānuku is not only an essential element of the Te Whare Tapa Whā model of well-being and identity (Durie, 1998) but also provides nutrition for students and whānau, through the cultivation and eating of the fruit and vegetables that they were growing at school. For Māori, the connection to the *atua* (ancestors) including Papatūānuku is an integral part of identity and whakapapa.

The participants in this professional inquiry all talked of the academic benefits for their students. Although this was not the highest priority initially for the leaders, with co-regulation, engagement and well-being being cited as of the highest importance, over time, most of the participants were seeing increases in measurable academic assessment in reading. This was put down to the children feeling safe and connected in their environments.

With trauma-informed approaches being implemented in the school, increased engagement was noted by all participants, with engagement being observed through increased hours spent at school, increased engagement in teacher instructions and classroom learning, and higher engagement in conversations with peers and adults. "When the children feel safe, their brains stop scanning for threats. They stop interpreting the words of their teachers and peers as potential threats and insults, and they start to relax and actually have sustained two-way conversations. The power balance is shared" (Participant B).

'Safety' and 'connection' were two phrases that all the participants used often in their kōrero. "Without safety and connections, you can forget about any learning happening" (Participant B). One participant noted that whānau engagement and connection had increased as whānau stopped seeing school as a threat. "We understood their [whānau] responses as trauma responses of fight, flight and fear. As staff, we brought our knowledge from our PLD to gain a deeper understanding of our community and the way they do things. We responded to them rather than reacting to them" (Participant E). The increased whānau engagement was having far-reaching positive benefits for the students and their learning, with one participant sharing:

> No one used to turn up to our parent-teacher interviews – they just wouldn't come. But now, we have just about every whānau in the community attending a hui. What did we do differently – we took the time to listen to our whānau, and we heard them tell us of the trauma they had experienced as kids at school. Coming to big group sessions was too overwhelming so we just held small hui with the student, their whānau and the kaiako that they had the strongest connection with. We gave them time and slowly the trust developed. (Participant C)

Trauma-informed approaches are about connections and relationships. In Te Ao Maōri, *whanaungatanga* (relationships) are at the heart of healing with connection to whānau, hapū and iwi, with relationships built on mutual trust, respect, reciprocity and whanaungatanga **(**Denston et al., 2022). A person's identity, strength and resilience come from their connection to their *whakapapa* (ancestors), culture, natural environment and whānau groups (McLachlan et al., 2023). Connections were mentioned often within the interviews, with the centrality of these being core. "Manaakitanga, whanaungatanga – we have redeveloped our vision. Everyone who comes in feels welcome. We teach our tamariki as a village – we all have connections with our kids and our community" (Participant C). "We listen, we observe, we respond – we don't react" (Participant E).

Sustainability of practice

The participants talked of being on a journey, as explained by Participant D, "Change doesn't happen overnight. This is a long journey. If you are going to do it, you need to commit to making changes in all aspects of your school". All participants emphasised that to be truly trauma-informed, things have to change – mindsets, policies, procedures, the way adults respond rather than react, and the way behaviour is viewed. It's through these changes and this commitment to doing things differently that practice becomes embedded. Once practice is embedded, and continually nurtured, revisited, refined and reflected upon, it becomes part of "who we are and what we do" (Participant B). As explained by one participant, "We changed our whole programme. We now have time for tamariki to

connect at the start of the day. We adapted our day so everyone has their needs met before they start the learning day" (Participant C).

> This is not just a matter of doing a course, and saying 'yep – we now use trauma-informed approaches'. It's a full investment of yourself and your staff into a different way of thinking and viewing society. We do not abandon our tamariki anymore through suspensions and exclusions. We give them a safe place of belonging and understanding, and support them to develop the skills needed to successfully navigate their emotions and reactions. (Participant A)

Participants cited ongoing PLD, caring for their people (staff well-being, students and whānau), and working out ways to try and fund the extra adults needed in this equation, as the highest priority in their current thinking for a sustainable future. "The bottom line for the school is, that there must be regular daily doses of connection between the adults and the children involved in this approach. Those might just be a number of very short microdoses of relational connection, or on other days that might be longer. You need adults available to do this" (Participant B). Participating school leaders talked of creative ways they provided the extra adults needed to make these approaches work, including an extra BOT-funded part-time teacher, using external grants money, tumuaki releasing teachers to run well-being teams, and partnering with private PLD providers through the provider's philanthropic funding. Most of the participants were accessing MOE-provided PLD funding, with a number citing restrictions to the flexibility of this, making it challenging to adapt this to their own school context. Lack of available financial resourcing was cited by all participants as an ongoing strain and barrier to being able to implement consistent ongoing systems-level change.

Participants in the study acknowledged the challenge of sustaining school-wide trauma-informed practices in light of staff turnover, leadership changes, and funding uncertainties. Kendziora and Yoder (2017) emphasise that sustainability hinges on leadership, ongoing coaching support, and accessible professional development opportunities, with educators more likely to implement sustainable quality practice when they have equitable access to professional development opportunities and support at both school and national governance levels. Within the participants, one school ran a conference at a financial loss because "we knew that if we could get this learning out to other educators, they too could see the benefits we were seeing" (Participant F).

The impact on teachers' well-being of teaching students impacted by trauma is an emerging area of research (Berger, 2019; Berger et al., 2016; Brunzell et al., 2021). The majority of Aotearoa educators will likely work with a number of students who have been impacted by trauma; however, studies indicate that educators do not feel that they have the necessary knowledge or strategies required to effectively support these students (Alisic et al., 2012; Oberg & Bryce, 2022). Many teachers list their reasons for leaving the profession as the challenges associated with student behaviour (Antoniou et al., 2013; Betoret 2009), limited specialist support, and ineffective school leadership (Whitehead et al., 2000). Studies suggest that educators experience more burnout than other professionals (Abraham-Cook, 2012; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). This lack of trauma-informed knowledge and training often negatively impacts educators' well-being, and puts educators at risk of experiencing compassion fatigue, secondary trauma stress and vicarious trauma (Bloom, 1995; Brunzell et al.,

2021; Oberg et al., 2023; Thomas et al., 2019) and ultimately may contribute to the high numbers of educators leaving the teaching profession due to burnout (Abraham-Cook, 2012; Christian-Brandt et al., 2020). Indeed Oberg et al. (2023) report the lack of trauma-specific training reported by teachers in studies was identified as a barrier to teachers feeling able to support traumatised students and their own well-being (Oberg et al., 2023). Studies have shown that educators who report being impacted by these stressors often go on to directly and negatively impact the well-being and academic progress of their students (Herman et al., 2018).

Thomas et al. (2019) emphasise the importance of leadership teams supporting staff through organisational culture, policies, and practices. The well-being of the teaching staff was cited by all participants as an ongoing issue central to their practice. Participants all highlighted the importance of the well-being of their staff and the need for mitigating the potential for vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue and burnout. Mitigating supports included, termly 1:1 sessions of professional supervision for every staff member, a mental health release day each term with more available if needed, BOT-funded vege boxes delivered to teaching staff homes regularly, 'tap in – tap out' strategies always available if teachers need a break whilst teaching with someone from the leadership team stepping in to cover the class, reducing the number of staff meetings, and ongoing in-school professional development around trauma-informed practice and relational neuroscience.

Within the findings of this professional inquiry, stood individuals supporting others through whanaungatanga, manaakitanga and selflessness, while at the same time investing their whole selves into supporting the creation of culturally responsive systems to empower and enhance the wellbeing and success of their staff, students, whānau and community.

Conclusion

The upsurge in both global and local communities experiencing trauma following the COVID-19 pandemic, natural disaster events, and the ongoing effects of intergenerational trauma, poverty, colonisation and marginalisation of minority groups, makes this research timely and applicable to the Aotearoa education sector.

Within this professional inquiry, school leaders provided their perspectives on the fundamental elements that facilitate the embedding of sustainable trauma-aware and neuroscience-informed practices, approaches, and systems in schools throughout Aotearoa. Predominant themes within this movement emphasise the centrality of relationships and connections, the need for system disruption, leadership and vision, the continual process of contextual exploration, the benefits for all stakeholders, and the importance of culturally appropriate practice. All themes identified in this inquiry highlight the importance of relationships, connections, and safety. These themes are mirrored internationally across health, education and social development sectors, however are yet to be seen as embedded practice in the mainstream population around the world.

The teaching profession continues to prioritise the well-being of its teachers and students. This endeavour involves formulating policies and practices aimed at enhancing well-being, including staff

retention in schools, while concurrently fostering increased student-school attendance and engagement (Ministry of Education, 2022). The strength of this professional inquiry is that it affirms that trauma-aware and neuroscience-informed approaches are proving to support both educators' and students' well-being and increase school engagement, whilst also decreasing the prevalence of disruptive behaviours. Current global research into this topic is characterised by the limited evaluative studies and longitudinal datasets examining the efficacy of systems-wide, culturally sustaining, trauma-informed approaches in schools (Brunzell et al., 2016; Dorado et al., 2016). A significant implication of this for educators in Aotearoa is considering whether the application of international programmes and approaches is culturally responsive to an Aotearoa context (Pihama et al., 2017).

This professional inquiry contributes research grounded in Aotearoa's educational practices to the rapidly evolving international movement. The qualitative data acquired through this inquiry can assist practitioners in cultivating a more profound comprehension of how trauma-aware and neuroscience-informed approaches and strategies can substantially impact the outcomes for students within the Aotearoa education system. The findings in this professional inquiry will support educators engaging in a paradigm shift in education, and support the sharing of practice embedding contextually appropriate, sustainable effective trauma-aware and neuroscience-informed pedagogy. Long term, it is hoped that this data will contribute to the case for equitable access to government-funded high-quality user-specific professional development around the implementation of culturally responsive trauma-informed approaches for all educators in Aotearoa. In the immediate term, it is hoped that this gathering of Aotearoa-situated practice-based evidence will shine a light on effective trauma-aware neuroscience-informed practice in schools today.

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Acknowledgements

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