Social emotional learning and trauma informed care in the school library

By Dr Meghan Harper

Snapshot

Dr Harper outlines the need for social emotional learning and trauma-informed care services embedded in school practices and describes clearly how school libraries can play a vital role in supporting, resourcing and fostering an optimal educational environment that benefits everyone.

Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and Trauma-Informed (TI) care services should be aligned and embedded in curricula to address the students holistically and to create an environment that will foster resilience and well-being. The foundational principles of trauma-informed care create an optimal learning environment and SEL provides students with the skills to engage with one another and thrive in an environment that fosters understanding of themselves and others. **The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL)** (2022) defines SEL as

> the process through which all young people and adults acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to develop healthy identities, manage emotions and achieve personal and collective goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain supportive relationships, and make responsible and caring decisions.

Research on the occurrences of childhood trauma suggests that it is more likely than not that children have experienced trauma. Statistics gathered from the World Health Organization (2021) suggest that children's mental health is a global issue. Global statistics surrounding mental health, suicide and chronic stress illuminate the prevalence of childhood trauma. Worldwide, 1 out of 7 adolescents suffer from mental disorders and mental health conditions account for 13% of the global burden of disease and injury in people aged 10–19 years. Depression is the third leading cause of illness and disability among adolescents. Half of all mental health conditions start by 14 years of age, and most cases are undetected and untreated. Suicide is the fourth leading cause of death in older adolescents ages 15–19 years across the globe.

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The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMSHA) (2019) defines trauma as 'an event or series of events that is experienced and has lasting effects on a person's mental, physical, social, or spiritual well-being.' Responses to trauma are individualized and it is difficult to predict how children will respond to the same or similar event as perceptions are dependent on many individual characteristics such as personality and disposition. Trauma is defined as an actual negative event or exposure to a real or perceived threat, or it can be a chronic lived experience such as effects of racism, oppression, poverty/homelessness, ageism, or

generational trauma. Chronic, ongoing traumatic stress is most problematic as it may alter brain function, IQ and result in significant negative impact on adult quality of life with long lasting, physical, emotional and mental health issues. The effects of trauma on cognition, physical health, emotions, brain health, mental health, behavior, and impact on adult quality of life are well documented. Educational researchers suggest that embedding trauma-informed principles and SEL have benefits for all children and the prevalence of trauma suggests that it is more likely that most individuals, whether adult or child have experienced trauma. Educators may be unaware of when or if a child has experienced trauma. Many students have difficulty identifying and describing how they are feeling or discussing the traumatic event. Trauma is stored in the non-verbal part of the brain and alters how the brain processes incoming information. Nemeroff (2016) states,

> Trauma-induced changes to the brain can result in varying degrees of cognitive impairment and emotional dysregulation that can lead to a host of problems, including difficulty with attention and focus, learning disabilities, low self-esteem, impaired social skills, and sleep disturbances.

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A child's behavior may undergo dramatic changes following a traumatic event; a social child may become withdrawn, or respond irrationally or emotionally to a routine event, a child's ability to read may also be negatively affected as brain processing and response becomes impaired. Educators need to be informed about the effects of trauma in children and alert to recognize the symptoms of trauma. Embedding SEL can help address these issues as students can connect their physical, mental, and emotional states to identify and articulate their feelings.

The Institute on Trauma and Trauma Informed Care (ITTIC) states that Trauma-Informed Care or (TIC)

> understands and considers the pervasive nature of trauma and promotes environments of healing and recovery rather than practices and services that may inadvertently re-traumatize.

Trauma informed care can be applied across disciplines and in a variety of settings, however, it is important for the principles to be applied throughout the organization, institution or setting at all levels, this includes policies, procedures and interactions of teachers and students. A program, organization, or system that is trauma-informed may be implemented in any type of service setting or organization and is distinct from trauma-specific interventions or treatments that are designed specifically to address the consequences of trauma and to facilitate healing. Educator Annette Breaux, (2015) underscores the importance of understanding how trauma affects behavior with this statement

> ...everyone in the classroom has a story that leads to misbehavior or defiance, 9 times out of 10 the story behind the misbehavior won't make you angry, it will break your heart.

In schools, trauma informed principles are the foundation for providing educational services and for guiding interactions of students and teachers. According to the Trauma Sensitive Schools organization (2016) schools should

reflect a shared understanding of trauma informed practice among all staff, support all children to feel safe physically, socially, emotionally, and academically and should address students' needs in holistic ways, accounting for relationships, self-regulation, academic competency, and physical and emotional well-being and explicitly connect students to the school community, providing multiple opportunities to develop and practice skills.

Many schools are embedding a trauma informed approach as the benefits are numerous and measurable. A trauma informed approach:

- Improves teacher and student satisfaction
- Improves success and job satisfaction among school/library personnel
- Creates an environment that supports and makes personnel feel cared-for
- Creates a proactive approach to safety
- Creates a safer physical and emotional environment for students and staff (reduces the number of negative encounters)
- Increases the quality of services provided
- Enhances a sense of community and connectedness to the community at large

A trauma-informed approach reflects adherence to six key principles rather than a prescribed set of practices or procedures. These principles may be generalizable across multiple types of settings, although terminology and application may be setting- or sector-specific:

- Safety
- Trustworthiness and Transparency
- Peer support
- Collaboration and mutuality
- Empowerment, voice, and choice
- Cultural, Historical, and Gender Issues

Traditionally in schools, students may be labeled as having anger management problems or having attention deficit disorder or as destructive and uncontrollable. Students would be blamed for choosing to act out or labeled as non-responsive. Traditionally, teachers' responses might include that the student needs consequences or medication. Alternatively, a trauma informed

approach would identify that a student acting out is using nonadaptive response to get their needs met, has trouble self-regulating or was triggered, lacks necessary social emotional skills, doesn't trust adults, or has a negative view of the world. Renowned trauma researcher Bessel van der Kolk (2014) states,

> If you feel safe and loved, your brain becomes specialized in exploration, play and cooperation; if you are frightened and unwanted, it specializes in managing feelings of fear and abandonment.

Educators who respond from a trauma informed perspective help the student to develop self-regulation skills and build trusting relationships.

A trauma-informed instructional environment includes a focus on developing student agency which allows student to believe in their own potential, build relationships and persist through obstacles and exercise their academic, social and professional knowledge and skills. To foster student agency, educators are advised to focus on developing relationships, those of student to student, and students and educators, before emphasizing content. Educators should invest time and energy in getting to know and understand the stories of students and the lives they lead. Best practices for a trauma informed approach include embedding SEL throughout the curriculum which is best implemented with a consistent 'team-based' approach by educators. Trauma-informed practices should be applied systemically and consistently throughout the school environment. The trauma-informed mindset should be supported with messages of compassion and empathy to others.

Equally important is the social emotional understanding and growth mindset of the professionals who work from a trauma informed perspective. Professionals need to understand and develop their social emotional skills and see value in adopting trauma informed principles in their life. To help other professionals implement trauma informed education and hone their social emotional learning it is important to provide information about trauma and its effects on the individual (adult and children) and opportunities for personnel to learn about the school community and its history, demographics, economics, and culture. Providing this information provides context and in-depth understanding of children and their lived experience. Equally important is allowing personnel to identify gaps in their understanding, knowledge or needed training to apply trauma informed practices in their professional and personal lives. School librarians have a unique role in schools and have many opportunities to support and facilitate SEL and trauma informed practices for the entire school community. Some best practices include:

- Connect students/educators to resources outside the physical space in the community with virtual and physical resources to support resilience, agency and well-being.

- Enable choice and flexibility of format of library resources to ensure information seeking and needs are addressed.

- Enhance and reduce complexity for access to resources through signage, displays, maximize use of the library online public access catalog, website and other informational and communication channels.

For many students who experience chronic trauma the time they spend in school may be the only time during the day that they feel a sense of physical and emotional safety. Library programs, instruction and communication should be accessible to all. Students and school personnel should feel welcome and comforted. The physical space should encourage a sense of calmness and support. Librarians can ensure this sense of safety by making sure the facility accommodates a wide range of interactions and activities that provide opportunities for students to engage in quiet, solo activities or those that have social engagement with peers or school personnel. Many librarians set up calming activities such as relaxation stations for coloring, soothing music or those that support creativity such as makerspaces or provide art supplies. Librarians can foster good social emotional activities with school-wide activities, such as puzzle solving, gratitude or kindness boards and activities that help students engage with their peers in collaborative, creative and critical thinking activities.

Library programming should address students' social, emotional, mental, and physical well-being and facilitate interactions within the library that are positive, nonjudgmental and reduce re-traumatization. The library becomes part of the solution to overcoming trauma and ensuring students have opportunities to practice positive communication strategies with others. Librarians can identify the resident experts within the school/ library to demonstrate to coworkers and students a stress reducing hobby, craft, skill and connect programming and instruction to resources that promote positive mental and physical well-being such as mindfulness, yoga, or the expressive arts. Other best practices include:

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- Provide a guided sensory walk outside the library to encourage connection with nature or a virtual guided walk on the beach or in the woods with calming sounds and pictures
- Provide opportunities/forum/anonymous input for patrons to contribute to facility enhancements, improvements, and suggestions
- Host health themed and movement-based programs
- Create self-care kits for check out.

To ensure students know about of these opportunities, librarians should implement multiple modes for accessing critical information via handouts, virtual, print, non-print access that provides choice of format and accessibility and recognizes developmentally appropriate practice for student with differing abilities and ages.

Librarians can become aware of many of the available resources and professional literature on these ideas through a plethora of online resources such as topically-focused Facebook groups, professional organizations, online toolkits, blogs, and articles in addition to professional books. For further reading and investigation, librarians may find the following professional sites useful:

Trauma Informed Educators Network Podcasts

Getting started with trauma-informed practices (Edutopia)

Giving traumatized kids a head start in healing

Teaching children from poverty and trauma

Child Trauma Toolkit for Educators

Unlocking the door to learning: Trauma Informed Classrooms and Transformational Schools

Social Justice and Cultural Competency: Essential Readings for School Librarians ISBN: 9781440871238 see chapter: Fostering Resilience, Wellness and Hope in the School Library

Student Health & Well-Being: How Libraries Can Create Safe Spaces

Librarians can take a leadership role to foster a school wide adoption of SEL and trauma informed approach by creating opportunities for library personnel and educators to connect with one another and build their own internal support networks or create opportunities for educators and colleagues to excel, shine and be recognized. Some other best practices include:

- Incorporate wellness in regularly scheduled meetings (practice mindful breathing before a discussion or meeting, take a break and dance)

- Provide information about trauma and recovery through conversation, classes, posters, handouts, and multimedia

- Incentivize self-care exercise, yoga, walking through the provision of school wide activities.

- Create an R and R corner for staff only with inspirational messages, soft chairs, or meditation relaxing music with headphones

Librarians can rest assured that incorporating activities, services and resources that acknowledge and foster SEL and trauma-informed practices are beneficial to all students and school personnel. The prevalence of trauma and the continuing need for students and educators to feel cared-for will ensure the library is viewed as essential and integral to promoting social emotional learning and a trauma-informed educational environment.

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