Impact of Trauma-Informed Practices on Social and Emotional Development in Early Childhood Classrooms

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of trauma-informed practices on the social and emotional development of young children in early childhood classrooms, particularly those with adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). Given the rising prevalence of ACEs and their negative effect on emotional regulation, social skills and classroom engagement, trauma-informed practices have emerged as a critical intervention within educational settings. A mixed-methods approach was used, combining quantitative data from the Social Emotional Assessment Measure (SEAM) and classroom behaviours observation with qualitative data from interviews with teachers. The study involved 15 early childhood educators and 120 children from three urban preschool classrooms selected based on having at least one year of trauma-informed practice implementation. The findings indicate marked improvements in children's ability to manage emotions, interact positively with peers and participate actively in classroom activities over the school year. Teachers reported that using trauma-informed strategies, such as establishing structured classroom routines and fostering positive relationships, contributed to a supportive classroom environment and enhanced students' performance. These results suggest that trauma-informed practices can play a key role in supporting the social and emotional development of children affected by adverse life experiences, highlighting the importance of integrating these approaches into early childhood educational training and practice to promote academic success and overall wellbeing of students.

Keywords: Trauma-Informed Practices, Emotional Development, ECE Classrooms.

Introduction

Childhood is a significant stage in human development, as it is during this period that emotional, social, and cognitive development are established, shaping how individuals live their lives. It is a very young age in children's lives, and they are normally vulnerable to experiences that may affect them emotionally or socially. Trauma is one such experience, and it may be quite influential and leave a long-lasting effect on the development of a child. Trauma, especially during early childhood, interferes with the process of emotional regulation, attachment, and social abilities (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Childhood trauma is a reality, and research findings indicate that a large percentage of children are exposed to a negative experience, whether it is an act of abuse, negligence, dysfunctional life in the house or violence in the community (Felitti et al., 1998). Consequently, it is essential to introduce trauma-

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sensitive learning institutions, especially in early childhood classrooms, to facilitate the emotional and social growth of traumatised children in the learning environment.

Trauma-informed practices (TIP) are the phenomenon that was prompted by the increased demand to implement interventions to support the needs of children who have gone through trauma. TIP is a practice that incorporates a trauma-informed vision into every aspect of the classroom, including teaching practices, classroom management strategies, and the classroom environment (Cole et al., 2013). The practice of being trauma-informed is expected to establish an environment where children would feel safe, appreciated and inspired, and in turn ensure positive emotional and social maturation. These practices include establishing trusted relationships, regulating emotions, and providing children opportunities to interact with the rest of the population in a safe and healthy manner (SAMHSA, 2014). Early childhood education can be approached with trauma-informed practices that address both children's individual needs and the development of a classroom atmosphere sensitive to the effects of trauma on child wellbeing, within the framework of each child's capacity to engage in the learning process and develop relationships with others in classroom settings.

The effects of trauma in early childhood can be very harmful. When a child experiences trauma at a young age, it can disrupt important social and emotional development. This may affect their ability to manage emotions, build positive relationships and respond to stress in a healthy manner. (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006). Traumatised children can be disrupted in their behaviour and end up being violent, shy or lack concentration skills that might have an adverse effect on their socialisation in a classroom and the development of healthy relationships with their peers (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Trauma may also impair brain development, especially in areas responsible for emotional regulation, memory, and learning, which, in the long run, may affect a child's academic achievement and psychological well-being (Perry and Szalavitz, 2006). Considering that the outcomes and impact of trauma on early childhood development are very detrimental, it is noteworthy that teachers should not neglect the needs of children who have experienced early childhood trauma. The trauma-sensitive approach that teachers can offer children provides them with an opportunity to develop self-confidence and learn coping strategies to meet the challenges they encounter. Trauma-informed practices facilitate and enable a classroom atmosphere in which children can learn to regulate their emotions positively, interact positively with peers and adults, and respond to stress in a positive manner (Cole et al., 2013). In addition, children develop a sense of independence and empowerment by feeling they have control over their surroundings and experiences. Such empowerment is achieved through learning coping strategies, choice provision, emotional validation, and the establishment of robust, trusting relationships with educators (SAMHSA, 2014).

Research evidence indicates that a trauma-informed approach can improve classroom climate, student behaviour, and social and emotional development (Cole et al., 2013). These children, who had also become traumatised in such classrooms, will mix with the rest of the children, and they can contain their feelings and become involved in the learning processes. Moreover, professional educators who received training about trauma-informed care report that they have been in a better position to support children with emotional and behavioural issues, and they are less stressed in the classroom (Shonkoff et al., 2012). These results suggest the possibility of implementing trauma-informed practices not only to enhance children's social and emotional growth but also to positively impact the learning process for children and educators.

Conclusively, early childhood trauma is closely linked to child development and can have lasting effects on their emotional and social well-being . Using trauma-informed practices is both compassionate and effective, as evidence shows these approaches can be used to support children who have experienced adverse life events. Trauma-informed practices can foster social and emotional growth in children by providing a safe, supportive, and empowering environment where they can flourish, become resilient, and excel academically and socially.

Considering that childhood trauma impacts development, the implementation of trauma-informed care in early childhood classrooms is a choice that should be made so that every child, irrespective of the levels of their early life experiences, can prosper.

Methodology

This study examined how trauma-informed practices influence social and emotional development in early childhood classrooms. A mixed-methods approach using both qualitative and quantitative data was selected to better understand how these practices affect children's emotional regulation, interactions, and overall classroom behaviour. This section outlines the research design and the data collection and analysis procedures used in the study.

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was used to collect and analyse quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously, allowing the study to benefit from the strengths of both methods. The quantitative component examined the impact of trauma on children's behaviour and emotional development using standardised questionnaires, while the qualitative component involved interviews with teachers to explore the importance of incorporating this practice in classroom settings.

Participants

The study included two groups: 15 early childhood educators and 120 children from three urban preschool classrooms. The classrooms were selected because they had implemented trauma-informed practices for at least 1 year. The teachers were aged between 25 and 50 years and had 3 to 20 years of experience in early childhood education. The children were between 3 and 5 years old. Approximately 30% of the children have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including exposure to domestic violence, neglect, or parental substance abuse. Informed consent was obtained from all participants involved in the study.

Data Collection Methods

Quantitative Data

To examine the impact of trauma-informed practice on children's social and emotional development, two main instruments were used: the Social Emotional Assessment Measure (SEAM) and classroom behaviour observation protocols. The SEAM was used to assess emotional regulation, social skills and overall classroom engagement. Teachers completed the SEAL at the beginning and end of the school year to track changes over time. Classroom observation protocols were used to record behaviours related to emotional regulation, peer interactions and disruptive behaviour during regular classroom activities. Trained research assistants conducted these observations at three points during the academic year: the beginning, middle, and end of the term.

Qualitative Data

Semi- structured interviews were conducted with 15 participating teachers to collect qualitative data. The interviews explored teachers' perspectives on trauma-informed practices, how they implemented them in classrooms, the challenges they faced, and their views on the impact of these practices on children's social and emotional development. Each interview lasted approximately 45 minutes and was audio recorded with the participants' consent. In addition to the interviews, the research team used field notes from classroom visits to gain further insight into teacher-child interaction and the overall environment.

Data Analysis Procedures

Quantitative Data Analysis

The quantitative data from the SEAM were analysed using a paired simple t-test to compare children's emotional regulation, social skills and classroom behaviour at the beginning and end of the school year. Descriptive statistics were used to summarise participants' dimorphic characteristics. Classroom observation data were analysed to identify trends in children's behavioural improvements over time. Observational data were coded based on behaviours associated with trauma-informed practices, such as the use of calming strategies and conflict resolution with peers or adults, as well as indicators of emotional regulation, including instances of children calming themselves independently or seeking support from peers or adults.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis. A deductive approach was used to identify common themes in the classroom implementation of trauma-informed practices. The themes were organised around key areas, including teacher training. Classroom environment and students' outcomes. The analysis also focused on identifying specific strategies that teachers considered most effective in supporting children's social and emotional development.

Validity and Reliability

Several steps were taken to ensure the validity and reliability of the research. The evaluation tools (teacher interviews and classroom observations) and the data were triangulated to ensure consistent results across the alternative data sources. To achieve inter-rater reliability, the classroom observation data and the interview transcript were independently coded by the different research assistants. When there was divergence, inter-rater disagreements were resolved through discussion. In addition, SEAM and classroom behaviour observation protocols were pre-tested to determine their suitability for the target group and research setting.

Ethical Considerations

Both the teachers and the parents of the participating students in the study gave informed consent. Confidentiality was also ensured through the use of pseudonyms for participants and the de-identification of the data. The teachers were made aware that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. In addition, the research team has been sensitised on research practices sensitive to traumas; this was done to ensure that the study was not traumatising for the participating children and staff members.

Results

This section presents the results of the study on the impact of trauma-informed practice on children's social and emotional development in early childhood. The findings are based on quantitative data from the Social-Emotional Assessment Measure (SEAM) and classroom behaviour observations. We collected qualitative data through teacher interviews. The results are organised into three main themes. Emotional regulation. Social skills and classroom engagement. Quantitative findings are presented in tables, while qualitative findings highlight teachers' experiences, perspectives, and views on the implementation and effectiveness of trauma-informed practice.

Emotional Regulation

The SEAM score showed a significant improvement in children's emotional regulation from the beginning to the end of the school year. Paired sample t-test results indicated that children

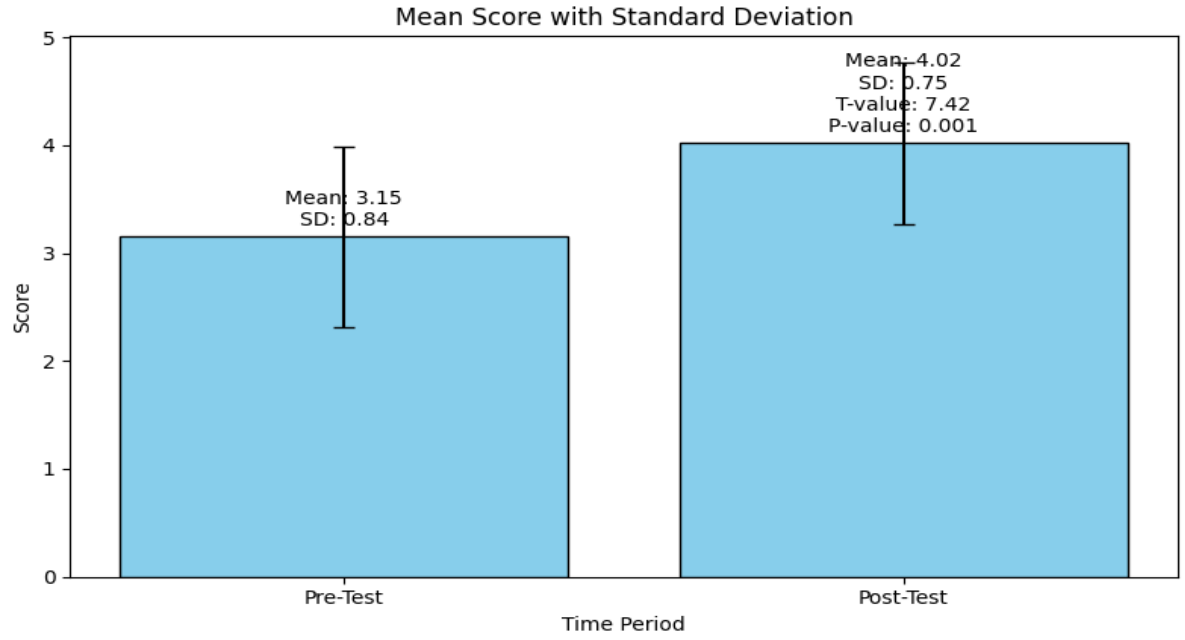
demonstrated increased self-control and better self-regulation over the course of the academic year.

Table 1: Paired Sample T-Test Results for Emotional Regulation

Time Period	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Pre-Test	3.15	0.84		
Post-Test	4.02	0.75	7.42	0.001

Note: Emotional regulation was measured using the SEAM (range 1-5, with higher scores indicating better emotional regulation).

Figure 1: Mean score with standard deviation



As shown in Table 1, the mean score for emotional regulation increased from 3.15 at the beginning of the school year to 4.02 at the end. The t-test results indicate that this increase was statistically significant (t = 7.42, p = 0.001), suggesting that the implementation of trauma-informed practices had a positive effect on children's ability to regulate their emotions.

Social Skills

The SEAM also assessed children's social skills, including their ability to engage with peers, share, and cooperate. The data indicated a significant improvement in social interactions over the course of the school year. Paired sample t-tests showed that the children demonstrated greater social competence at the end of the year compared to the beginning.

Table 2: Paired Sample T-Test Results for Social Skills

Time Period	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Pre-Test	3.18	0.78		
Post-Test	4.05	0.72	6.96	0.001

Note: Social skills were measured using the SEAM (range 1-5, with higher scores indicating better social skills).

As shown in Table 2, the mean score for social skills increased from 3.18 at the beginning of the school year to 4.05 at the end. The results of the paired sample t-test (t = 6.96, p = 0.001)

confirmed that this change was statistically significant, indicating that trauma-informed practices contributed to improved social interactions among the children.

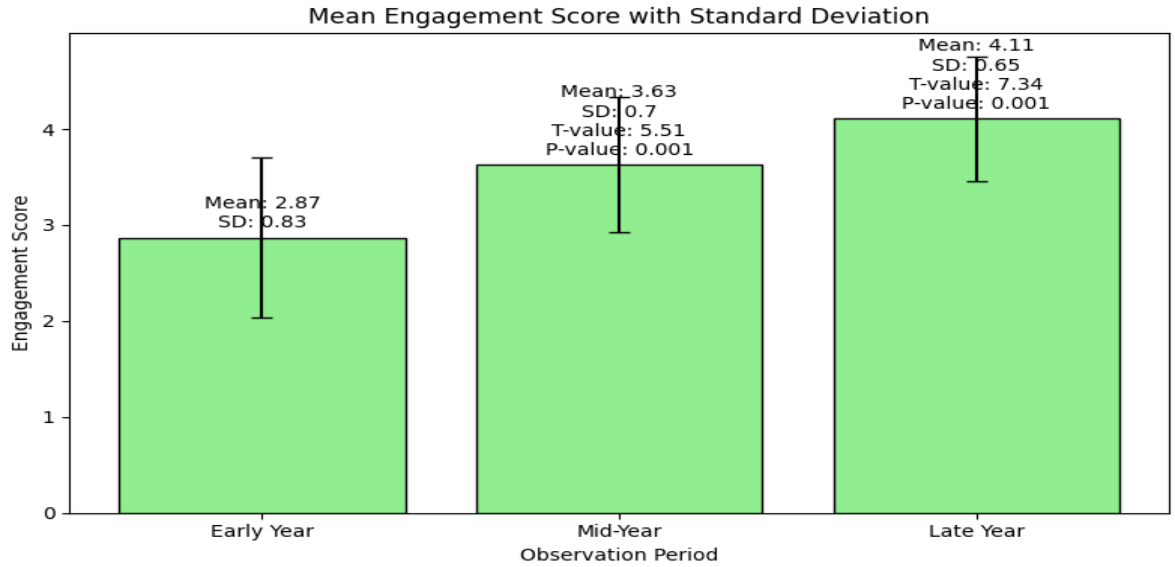
Classroom Engagement

Classroom engagement, as measured by the frequency of active participation in learning activities and peer interactions, also showed significant improvement. Data from classroom behavior observations were analyzed, and results indicated a notable increase in engagement in the later months of the school year.

Table 3: **Classroom Engagement – Observation Data**

Observation Period	Mean Engagement Score	Standard Deviation	t-value	p-value
Early Year	2.87	0.83		
Mid-Year	3.63	0.70	5.51	0.001
Late Year	4.11	0.65	7.34	0.001

Figure 2: Mean Engagement score with standard deviation



Note: Engagement was rated on a scale from 1 to 5, with higher scores indicating higher levels of engagement. As Table 3 shows, the effect of children in the classroom during the initiation of the school period (M = 2.87) to the middle period (M = 3.63) and, finally, the end period (M = 4.11) increased significantly.The t-tests were repeated and the results showed significant differences in engagement levels at the beginning and middle of the year (t = 5.51, p = 0.001) and the mid and the late year (t = 7.34, p = 0.001) were statistically significant.

Qualitative Data

Findings from the qualitative data also supported the positive impact of trauma-informed practices on children's social and emotional development. Teachers reported that children felt safer and more supported in the classroom due to consistent use of these approaches, including structured routines to help children practice daily activities, emotional validation and restorative approaches.

Teachers also observed that children who previously displayed challenging behaviour such as aggression or withdrawal showed improvement in emotional regulation and developed more positive relationships with others. Teachers observed that trauma-informed exercises not only benefited children but also positively impacted the entire classroom environment. Teachers

reported feeling more confident in managing the classroom and supporting students' emotional needs. They also emphasised the importance of ongoing professional development training to effectively implement these practices in the classroom.

In conclusion, the quantitative findings showed a strong positive impact of trauma-informed practices on children's emotional regulation, social skills and classroom engagement. The quantitative data supported these results, with teachers reporting significant improvements in students' behaviour and classroom interactions. Overall, the findings suggest that trauma-informed practices play a vital role in supporting the social and emotional development of children in early childhood classrooms.

Discussion

The study aimed to examine the role of trauma-informed practice in influencing the social and emotional development of children in early childhood classrooms. The results of the discussion reveal that the impact of practices related to a trauma-informed approach predetermined the beneficial effect of emotional control, social abilities, and classroom work. The findings contribute to a growing body of research indicating that trauma-informed practices can effectively support young children with early adverse life experiences. These practices help reduce the negative effects of trauma and promote positive social and emotional development within educational settings.

Emotional regulation showed significant improvement in this study, consistent with previous research indicating that children who experience early childhood trauma often face challenges in self-regulation (Perry & Szalavitz, 2006). Findings from the Social-Emotional Assessment Measure (SEAM) and classroom observations clearly demonstrated significant improvement in children's ability to manage their emotions from the beginning to the end of the school year. This improvement may be attributed to the structured and predictable classroom environment established through trauma-informed teaching practices. Consistent routines, supportive student-teacher interactions and validation of children's emotions all likely contributed to a sense of emotional wellbeing and safety, enabling children to develop more effective coping strategies. These outcomes align with Cole et al. (2013), who highlighted that trauma-sensitive environments support the n. development of self-regulation and resilience in children.

Similarly, improvement in social skills observed over the years may be attributed to a supportive and trauma-informed classroom environment. These practices provided structured opportunities for children to interact, develop communication skills and learn conflict resolution and pro-social behaviour supported by positive reinforcement from trained teachers. Previous research has shown that trauma can disrupt social functioning, including the ability to maintain healthy peer relationships (Shonkoff et al., 2012). However, by applying trauma-informed principles such as developing empathy, teaching conflict resolution skills, using non-punitive approaches and promoting a culture of respect, educators were able to successfully create an environment that supported the positive development of children. These findings are consistent with earlier research suggesting trauma-informed approaches can enhance children's social and emotional skills (Cole et al., 2013).

Another important benefit of trauma-informed practices observed in this study was improved classroom engagement. Children were more involved and participated in learning activities and interacted with peers as they felt emotionally safe and supported.

The increased engagement supports research evidence that children with early trauma are more likely to engage in school when the environment is predictable and supportive (SAMHSA, 2014). These findings are also consistent with studies that suggest children at risk show significant improvement and participation in trauma-sensitive classrooms (Shonkoff et al., 2012).

Qualitative data from teachers' interviews were used to further demonstrate the positive outcomes observed in this study. Teachers reported that trauma-informed practices not only supported the development of children's social and emotional skills but also contributed to a more positive and supportive classroom environment overall.

These findings are consistent with other studies reporting trauma-sensitive approaches benefit both students and teachers by prompting a collaborative and supportive learning environment (Cole et al., 2013). In the present study, teachers also reported increased confidence in managing challenging behaviours and supporting children with emotional and behavioural needs.

This highlights the importance of ongoing professional development in ensuring effective implementation of trauma-informed practices in classroom settings.

Irrespective of positive findings, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relied on teachers' self-report data, which may be subject to personal bias. Secondly, the study was limited to a one-year time period and did not examine the long-term effects of trauma-informed practices. A key limitation of this study is that it did not provide trauma-informed training or intervention in the schools. Instead, it relied on practices that were already being implemented. Also, the type and amount of training the three schools received were not the same, which may impact outcomes.

Further longitudinal research is recommended to ensure long-term impact. Additionally, future studies are needed to explore the influence of trauma-informed practices to meet the needs of children from different backgrounds and levels of exposure to various types of traumas.

In conclusion, this study provides strong evidence that trauma-informed practice can significantly support the social and emotional development of children in early childhood classrooms. These practices help children regulate their emotions, develop positive social behaviour, and engage more effectively in learning by creating a safe and predictable environment. They also equip teachers with strategies to better support children affected by trauma. The findings highlight the importance of integrating trauma-informed training and practice in early childhood education to support the wellbeing and development of vulnerable children.

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides strong evidence that trauma-informed practices can be effectively implemented to enhance the social and emotional development of young children in early childhood classrooms. These practices support children in developing emotional regulation, interpersonal communication skills and active classroom participation by creating environments that are safe, predictable and student-centred.

Such approaches not only benefit children who have experienced trauma but also contribute to a positive and supportive classroom that is beneficial for both students and teachers. The findings highlight the importance of training educators in trauma-informed approaches and integrating this practice into early childhood educational teacher training curricula.

Further research should focus on examining the long-term effects of trauma-informed practices and exploring the impact of trauma on children from diverse backgrounds and those carrying trauma exposure.

Overall, the findings suggest the need for broader system-level policy changes required to ensure that all children, especially those affected by trauma, are provided with a supportive environment that promotes their social, emotional and academic success and holistic wellbeing.

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