

Considerations for Incorporating Trauma-Informed Care Content within Special Education Teacher Preparation and Professional Development Programs

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ABSTRACT

Trauma-informed care (TIC) is the practice of consciousness and awareness of trauma that guides educators in developing academic and behavioral support for students with exceptionalities who have experienced trauma. TIC can support students from the lens of Positive Behavioral Intervention Supports (PBIS) and Social Emotional Learning (SEL) within Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). The purpose of this article is to explore the integration of TIC practices within classrooms that utilize the MTSS framework and to assist pre-service and in-service teachers with implementing TIC practices within inclusive and restrictive K-12 learning environments.

KEYWORDS

Multi-tiered systems of support, school-wide positive behavior supports and interventions, social and emotional learning, trauma-informed care

A vast number of competencies are addressed in special education teacher preparation programs (Council for Exceptional Children, 2015). Infusing teacher preparation programs with culturally responsive practices (Robertson et al., 2017) provides a forum for educators to address developmental, social, and cultural needs of pupils with and without exceptionalities in their future K-12 classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2014). Principles of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) are interwoven throughout all the knowledge and skills areas. Yet, a topic that does not always appear in focused research and practice within the field of special education and directly connects with DEI is trauma-informed care (TIC). TIC represents a holistic approach to structuring culture, practices, and policies to be sensitive to the experiences and needs of individuals who have experienced trauma (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). As it relates to education, over two-thirds of children residing in the United States have reported experiencing at least one traumatic

event during their life (Stevens, 2017). Examples of trauma experienced by the K-12 population that may impact behavior and academic performance include the loss of a parent, neglect, abuse, social violence, social isolation and natural disasters (Stevens, 2012). Furthermore, adverse childhood experiences (ACEs; Felitti et al., 1998) such as abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction are all common experiences for students with emotional/behavioral disorders (Cavanaugh, 2016). Data around childhood and school-age trauma make it imperative for teachers to consider the impact of trauma on students' behavioral and social development.

Students who have experienced trauma have unique needs, which must be addressed to adequately include them in educational settings. Trauma affects all aspects of students' lives. Their responses, ideations, behaviors, and more are inseparable from the negative impacts of trauma. Therefore, it is reasonable to estimate that providing teachers and teacher candidates with specific knowledge and skills grounded in TIC could have a positive impact on student

outcomes. When TIC is the basis of decision making, the emphasis changes from education to well-being, which more holistically encompasses students' DEI needs. Educators who practice TIC recognize and respond to the impact of childhood trauma and traumatic stress (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018).

Although Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) is a widely used framework for the process of providing interventions, TIC is an approach that emphasizes *how* the framework and interventions are implemented (Cavanaugh, 2016). MTSS encompasses Positive Behavior Intervention Supports (PBIS) which offer a range of interventions that are applied systematically, with fidelity, and provide behavioral supports of increasing intensity across delivery tiers. There is a need for school mental health practices, such as TIC, to be aligned with PBIS, especially when supporting students with exceptionalities, like those with emotional behavioral disorders (Weist et al., 2018). Thus, the purpose of this article is to explore the integration of TIC practices within MTSS frameworks and detail TIC practices that can be included within special education teacher preparation programs and professional development for in-service teachers working with students in inclusive/restrictive K-12 settings.

Trauma and Behavioral Challenges in Special Education

Historically, special educators have intentionally and unintentionally excluded environmental factors during disability identification and accommodation (Berardi & Morton, 2017). Recently, researchers have suggested that experiencing maltreatment places students at a higher risk for developing disabilities, making TIC relevant for the field of special education specifically (Corr & Santos, 2017; Panlilio & Corr, 2020).

According to Merikangas et al. (2010), roughly one out of five students experience mental health challenges that lead to externalizing behaviors such as inattention, impulsivity, and general disruptive behavior. Childhood adversities and traumatic experiences, particularly complex trauma, have often been associated with toxic stress responses in children, defined as the prolonged activation of the stress response system in the absence of responsive caregiving (Shonkoff et al., 2009; Shonkoff et al., 2012). These toxic stress responses, in turn, lead to a host of negative outcomes for children that include physical, psychological, social, and behavioral problems (D'Andrea et al., 2012). Mueser and Taub (2008) reported that post-traumatic stress has been experienced by 30% of adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders (EBD). Walker and colleagues (2004) also asserted that students with EBD commonly deal with ACEs and situations that negatively impact their social, emotional, and cognitive well-being. Additionally, in a large-scale study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC; Felitti et al., 1998), three categories of ACEs were recognized: abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. When examining results from each category, Felitti et al. found that the most prevalent ACEs were 28.3% sexual abuse (abuse category), 14.8% emotional neglect (neglect category), and 26.9% household substance abuse (household dysfunction category). These findings were further supported by more recent findings from Lightfoot and others (2011), indicating that children in the welfare system who have experienced maltreatment were commonly identified as having emotional disturbances. Although connections have been established between disability diagnoses and childhood trauma (Corr & Santos, 2017; Panlilio & Corr, 2020), research and scholarship that integrate TIC into

special education teacher preparation programs are minimal.

To effectively meet the needs of students with exceptionalities, including students with EBD, one must be familiar with the students' social-emotional, physical, cognitive, and communication skills (Benner et al., 2013). The education of students with EBD is challenging, which is attributed to the complex nature of the disorder (Kauffman & Landrum, 2018). Subsequently, understanding TIC could be an essential element in special education teacher preparation, as it promotes equitable practice (Herrenkohl et al., 2019). Furthermore, given the compulsory nature of K-12 education in the United States, educators are at an important nexus of providing academic rigor and instruction, as well as providing the necessary resources to protect and improve the well-being of their students (Oyler, 2011). While educators will ideally seek to protect children from complex traumatic experiences, a need also exists to help them move from the role of protectors toward the role of promoters of their students' behavioral well-being. In order to do this, schools need to adopt a school-wide trauma-informed approach to engaging with students.

Efforts to support students who experience trauma or maltreatment should occur as a natural part of the educational experience. Consequently, teachers need to be prepared to address the needs of all students who enter their classrooms. As such, preparing teachers for this reality is of utmost importance. Although TIC and the nuances within it could be taught as a standalone course at the pre-service teacher level, classroom and behavior management courses are more than appropriate settings to broach the subject of TIC and introduce the topic to future special educators who will be working with students who experience behavioral challenges.

Trauma-Informed Care and Multi-Tiered Systems of Support in Behavior

A TIC approach has been broadly defined as a prevention approach by any child- or family-serving system that recognizes and responds to the impact of trauma and traumatic stress on children, as well as anyone else that is part of that system, such as caregivers or staff (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2018). Specifically, school-based TIC approaches apply a philosophy toward a school system wherein early adversity and trauma are recognized as important factors that are associated with students' academic-related competencies (Panlilio, 2019). Chafouleas and colleagues (2016) recommended that such school-based trauma-informed approaches be framed within a multi-tiered framework of school-based service delivery. MTSS is typically conceptualized as prevention-oriented models that have traditionally been used to deliver targeted services for students to support their school-based needs.

MTSS is a comprehensive framework that provides support for students through targeted preventions and interventions that are connected to providing support for students by catering to their whole self (Hunter et al., 2015). These supports are intentional and developed through a process of identifying a student's level of behavioral needs (Sailor et al., 2021). Multi-tiered models typically include a three-tiered pyramid approach, following the CDC prevention models (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2021), wherein Tier 1 includes low intensity support, and Tiers 2 and 3 include moderate and high intensity support guided by the data-based assessments at each tier. MTSS frameworks that focus on behavior are usually described as School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (SWPBIS), and they focus on

the process of students learning how to apply the needed social and emotional skills necessary to control their emotional impulses, set goals, and interact with others competently (i.e., social, and emotional learning [SEL; Kendziora & Yoder, 2016]).

Presently, school systems are implementing SWPBIS through MTSS for students with and without exceptionalities in the school (Steed & Shapland, 2020). MTSS has been an influential framework for teachers and school administrators due to opportunities provided by the framework to: (a) create individualized plans of academic and behavioral support within the classroom, (b) reduce the number of distractions and triggers in the least restrictive classroom setting, and (c) implement intentional instruction with awareness of trauma triggers in the classroom (Benner et al., 2013). The Schools Committee of the National Child Traumatic Stress Network (2018) suggests using an MTSS model to incorporate TIC into schools to widen the scope of intentional instruction. This would suggest that TIC can be interwoven with emotional and behavioral supports to improve cross-cutting student outcomes.

In applying TIC within MTSS systems, it is critical to remember the foundational needs of students schoolwide. Cavanaugh (2016) described six trauma-informed school practices; however, we posit that these practices are better described as considerations for setting a supportive school climate by implementing TIC with the MTSS frameworks of SWPBIS and SEL. In the training of pre-service/in-service teachers, particularly when it comes to behavior and motivation, understanding the "why" is essential in supporting students with traumatic experiences. Cavanaugh's six trauma-informed school considerations help frame the conversation around reasons teachers (and schools' writ

large) need to be cognizant of trauma as they implement PBIS and SEL systems. School climate should include consideration for:

1. Safety and consistency knowing that students who experience trauma have usually experienced life circumstances that have threatened their physical and emotional safety as well as lives full of unpredictability.

2. Culturally responsive practices as students' life circumstances vary by culture, background, and language and can provide insight on trauma that they may have experienced.

3. Positive interactions that include positive praise statements, behavior specific praise, and tangible reward systems that support fostering a climate that is encouraging to students.

4. Peer supports that encourage positive interactions with others that have similar experiences or come from similar backgrounds and allow students to see, hear, and practice opportunities that allow for social, emotional, and confidence growth.

5. Targeted supports that will scaffold behavior within tiered systems including PBIS and SEL.

6. Individualized supports that may include identification of students with the most intensive traumatic experiences for services in and out of the school setting.

In addition, SWPBIS and SEL can play an important role within an MTSS framework. The trauma-informed teacher, after collecting data from the student using universal methods, may assign the student to work with a specific group or partner as a tier two intervention (Fondren et al., 2020). If the tier two intervention does not yield the desired results, the student will receive 1:1 support in the least restrictive setting before referral to an interventionist for personalized support in needed areas (Meyer et al., 2013).

Trauma-Informed Care and School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

The focus of SWPBIS is prevention of student behavioral problems through a range of interventions applied systematically and with fidelity across the three MTSS service delivery tiers: (a) Tier 1 (primary) serves the entire classroom and includes pre-diagnosis interventions, (b) Tier 2 (secondary) involves targeted support in small groups, and (c) Tier 3 (tertiary) integrates individualized support (Hunter et al., 2015). This framework is designed to improve academic and behavioral outcomes for students, providing teachers with access to and training in evidence-based practices (Hunter, 2020) and progress monitoring systems. One example includes self-monitoring, in which students working within Tier 2 (small group) engage in instructional learning and independence through self-regulation of behavioral goals that are embedded within their Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP). TIC within a SWPBIS framework can be used proactively and reactively for students in need of behavioral support in the classroom. Another example is students receiving wraparound services (within tier 3) to allow for positive academic and behavioral outcomes in the classroom (Hunter et al., 2018). By integrating TIC into SWPBIS, educators can approach student behavior from a place of healing and understanding, which may positively affect student outcomes. The SWPBIS offers the opportunity for teachers to provide explicit and culturally responsive expectations, as well as to build mutually respectful relationships that establish an environment of positive student engagement. Through the MTSS framework, school systems will be able to integrate a holistic process that transforms classroom learning environments (Lane et al., 2014). As K-12 school leadership teams adopt social-emotion-

TABLE 1: Trauma Informed-Care within School-Wide Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports

Tier	Checklist
Tier 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Individual behavioral plans to support students academically, including students transitioning from a restrictive environment into a least restrictive environment. • Wraparound Services featuring teacher, parent, mental health professional, and social worker that focuses on planning, development, and monitoring to allow for student success in the classroom from a positive behavioral intervention support perspective. • Wraparound Team ensuring that an intervention in the form of Trauma-Focused Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (TFCBT) takes place. TFCBT is an evidence-based strategy shown to be effective for students who have experienced single, multiple, and/or complex traumatic events.
Tier 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intentional, small flexible grouping in which the instructor is providing an opportunity for students to monitor their behavioral goals through Check-In/Check-Out. • Intentional, small flexible grouping in which the instructor is providing an opportunity for students to engage in conflict management. • Providing support for instructional learning and independence through self-regulation and self-monitoring of behavioral goals that are embedded within the student's Behavioral Intervention Plan (BIP).
Tier 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers providing explicit, culturally responsive expectations and building mutually respectful relationships to set a positive, engaging learning environment. • Peer-Mediated Instruction in which students have an alternative to large group instruction by working with peers on academic task and problem-based learning projects. • Conscious teaching and awareness with adults modeling emotion regulation and providing students with constructive, positive behavior to guide students.

al competency programs to target the needs of their students with and without exceptionalities, a PBIS framework can provide the necessary structures to teach social-emotional competencies effectively, including the use of teams to examine data, monitor fidelity, and measure the overall effectiveness (Barret et al., 2018). Furthermore, the implementation of MTSS and the integration of SWPBIS constitute a warranted shift in focus to the social and emotional needs of students (Panlilio, 2019). See Table 1 for a checklist of TIC practices that can be

used within an SWPBIS framework for students.

Trauma-Informed Care and Social and Emotional Learning

SEL focuses on student understanding of the management of emotions, thoughts, and dispositions within five domains: (a) self-awareness, (b) self-management, (c) social awareness, (d) relationship skills, and (e) responsible decision-making (Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, 2013). SEL's emphasis on

TABLE 2:
Trauma Informed-Care Practices within Social and Emotional Learning

Tier	Checklist
Tier 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop partnerships within the community for access to intense resources for those who need them. • Use of restorative practices for individual student issues (i.e., refrain from automatic punishment procedures). • Have a recovery services plan for individual students and staff as needed • Ensure students have safe spaces with culturally responsive elements on a per student (or staff) basis. • Refer and engage individual families in services with access to services shared • Continuously monitor responses to traumatic events for individual students and staff.
Tier 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Trauma screening for TIC plans and early intervention. • Using developmentally appropriate trauma-informed responses. • Enlisting the help of families to identify students in need of TIC that can be provided in school. • Explicitly teaching identified students' social skills. • Re-evaluate any policies that are antithetic to cultural inclusion and conduct a threat assessment. • Use a multidisciplinary team to create TIC interventions for in-school support across students and staff.
Tier 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify and map resources and services and how to access them. • Develop an emergency management plan and ensure all staff and stakeholders are aware of TIC procedures. • Ensure school discipline is trauma-informed and equitable (e.g., refrain from zero-tolerance policies or unnecessarily involving the school resource officer). • Develop a positive school community through a culturally supportive learning environment. • Educate staff, students, parents, and stakeholders of TIC policies and procedures. • Assess exposure to trauma for students and staff.

building positive relationships with others aligns with TIC's keen focus on relationships that provide support for students; thus, the two are easily implemented in tandem. One example within Tier 1 includes school consideration of identifying and mapping resource services, and how students can access them. TIC emphasizes the notion of providing school-age children safe spaces and environments (Putman et al., 2020) while SEL helps school-age children survive and cope in various situations (affected by trauma). Another example within Tier 1 includes the administration team/teachers developing an emergency plan and ensuring all staff and stakeholders are aware of TIC procedures. By having a focus on SEL and TIC when working with students, educators are not only knowledgeable about the potential effects but actions as well. See Table 2 for a checklist of TIC practices that can be used within an SEL framework for students.

Incorporating TIC within Special Education Teacher Preparation and Professional Development Programs

TIC training can be infused within courses within special education teacher preparation programs. One option for consideration is ungraduated/graduate classroom/behavioral management courses. This can be done through connecting the content of TIC within the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) High Leverage Practices (HLP's). HLP's for teachers are a set of clearly defined instructional practices that are observable, used frequently by teachers, and associated with improved student outcomes across grade levels, content areas, and academic skills within MTSS (McLeskey et al., 2017). The four domains for HLP's include (a) Collaboration, (b) Assessment, (c) Social Emotional Practices, and (d)

Instruction. From the Collaboration Domain, specifically, HLP #1 *Collaborate with Professionals to Increase Student Success*, classroom/behavioral management instructors can provide detail on what wraparound services are. Wraparound Services (provided within Tier 3 of PBIS) can feature educational teams that includes a student's teacher, parent, mental health professional, and social worker in which the team focuses on planning, development, and monitoring to allow for student success in the classroom from a PBIS perspective (Shepherd & Linn, 2015). From the Assessment Domain, HLP #4 *Use Multiple Sources of Information to Develop a Comprehensive Understanding of a Student's Strengths and Needs*, a discussion on Behavioral Support Plans for students, including student transition within least restrictive environments, can be a featured topic within a classroom/behavioral management course. From the Social Emotional Domain, specifically, HLP #9 *Teach Social Behaviors* (within the domain of Social Emotional Practices) connects with TIC practices, particularly Tier 2/SEL in which educators explicitly teach identified students' social skills. Instructors can create lessons/discussion points on the aspects of teachers providing social skill instruction. Social skills training programs are often overlooked components of behavior and classroom management plans; however, social skills training is an intervention that may increase the social skills and social competencies of students with EBD (Shepherd & Linn, 2015). From the Instruction Domain, specifically HLP #17, *Use Flexible Grouping*, instructors can model what flexible grouping is. Flexible Grouping incorporates cooperative learning principles where teachers assign students to heterogeneous groups (different content skill mastery, gender, and cultural/ethnic identities) based on

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clear learning goals, providing a forum for peer mediation, and the opportunity for positive and corrective feedback to support student of learning (Hunter, 2020). Table 1 and 2 feature content on TIC and various connections to HLP's. It is recommended for pre-service/in-service teachers to engage with content that connects TIC and HLP's within MTSS (Taylor & Bhana, 2021.)

Considerations for special education professional development includes teachers undergoing an extensive training that addresses the following components:

- Understanding Trauma and ACEs (Dong et al., 2003)
- Challenging current thought processes vs. TIC attributions (Hoskins et al., 2018)
- Identifying ways educators may be trauma informed (Plumb et al., 2016)
- Direct overview of MTSS (August et al., 2018)

National Centers and state agencies provide continuous professional development to support in-service teachers with implementing strategies associated with the MTSS framework (Barret et al., 2018). School-wide training in the

implementation of TIC practices, with specific training at the classroom level, is recommended, and educators are encouraged to bear in mind that the process of becoming a trauma-informed institution requires continuous evaluation. As an ongoing learning process, school systems should incorporate observation of trauma-informed practices during teacher evaluation, as well as provide ongoing professional development opportunities that continuously support teachers within schools that utilize the MTSS framework.

Final Thoughts

As K-12 students spend at least seven hours per day in school, teachers and school administrators have ample time to positively influence a student's behavior and meet their academic needs. At this point, teacher education around TIC is not a national requirement, as there is currently no mandated trauma-informed training for educators. However, educators will not be able to implement trauma-informed practices without first being introduced to TIC (Plumb et al., 2016), practices that are crucial to working with vulnerable student populations.

The goal of joining principles of TIC with the MTSS framework, and interventions (e.g., SWPBIS and SEL) is to make sure consideration is given to the behavioral and emotional aspects surrounding current interventions and practices that are effective with all students (Adams, 2014). The overall goal is to design actionable steps toward creating mandatory TIC trainings, certifications, and educational curricula for educators and educational leaders within special education teacher preparation programs and the continuation of professional development (Cavanaugh, 2016). In her work, Ladson-Billings (1999) shared the importance of preparing educators for teaching diverse populations with indi-

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Monica Bester

Monica Bester is an Educator, Doctoral Candidate, and Author of the book *They Never Told*, which focuses on the development of trauma-informed relationships with children. Her research includes trauma-informed care, special education, and working with students diagnosed with an emotional disorder. Her work as a social worker in the mental health field catapulted her interest in trauma research and education. Monica makes it a priority to not only implement healthy boundaries, self-care rituals, and preventative mental health measures for herself but to help others find and keep their balance as well when working in high stress environments with individuals impacted by trauma.

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Sandra Nichols is a professor of special education at the University of Memphis. Dr. Nichols' background includes more than 20 years of service in the field of special education as a behavior interventionist, early interventionist, administrator, and teacher educator in rural and urban schools. She has authored and co-authored publications and presentations on the topics of partnership development, rural education, culturally relevant pedagogy, critical race theory, and instructional support for students with exceptionalities.

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vidualized needs. University teacher education programs that include classroom behavior management courses should include instruction and support for TIC in MTSS frameworks (e.g., SWPBIS and SEL) which will assist with supporting students from diverse populations with individualized needs. By changing the mindsets and approaches of educators, student learning outcomes can be positively affected (Wiest-Stevenson & Lee, 2016).

Pre-service special education teachers who are trained to recognize the signs of trauma and to implement instructional strategies and interventions which support students who have been exposed to trauma can better provide equitable services to students with exceptionalities (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014). As TIC is implemented, the educational nexus would not be replaced. Rather, special education research and practice would be complemented with TIC research and practice to provide a more holistic approach to student success.

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