

# Toward a trauma-informed praxis in education



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# Introduction/overview

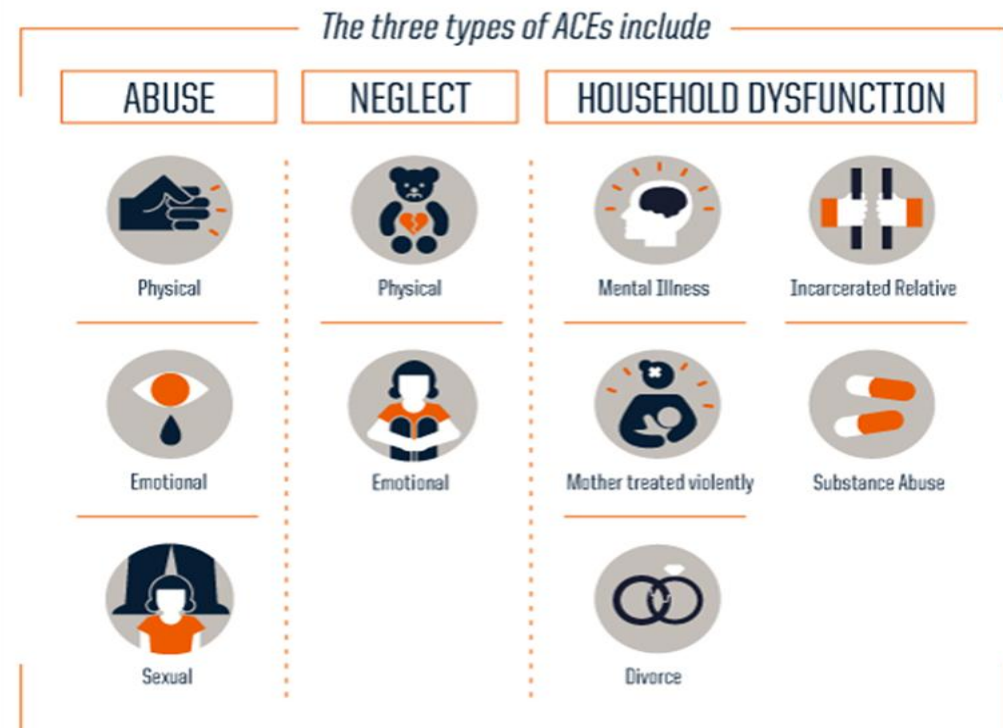
- Given the prevalence and devastating consequences of childhood trauma, there has been a surge in initiatives to help schools become trauma-informed.
- Despite the growing adoption of such initiatives, a number of concerns have been expressed.
- The Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF, Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) : An alternative paradigm for understanding emotional & psychological distress, based primarily on the negative operation of power in people's lives.
- Drawing the anti-oppression educational theory of Paulo Freire, I argue that a trauma-informed *praxis* guided and informed by the PTMF, can help redress many of the criticisms of existing approaches in schools.

# Adverse Childhood Experiences

- Childhood adversities are common and the effects are damaging and wide ranging
- An extremely robust and consistent body of evidence strongly links childhood adversity to negative outcomes across the lifespan

Bebbington, et al. (2004; 2009); Felitti, et al., (1998); Dube, Anda, Felitti, et al. (2001)

Original ACE Study focused on 10 categories of adversity (Felitti et al., 1998)



\*Adversities include other very negative experiences like racism, poverty, homelessness & community violence (Johnstone & Boyle, 2018)

# Concerns about ACE research



- ACE study was instrumental in drawing attention to devastating consequences of childhood adversity
- However, there are concerns about the misuse and misapplication of ACE research in educational and other applied settings (Anda, Porter & Brown, 2020; Finkelhor, 2018; Kelly-Irving & Delpierre, 2019; McEwen and Gregerson, 2018)
  - It was designed as a epidemiological survey, but it has been misused as an individual screening tool (e.g. ACEs too high website)
  - Brushes over structural inequalities – poverty, discrimination, homelessness, marginalisation
  - Precludes consideration of how adversity was subjectively experienced by the child

# Trauma

- Very distressing experiences that overwhelm a person's capacity to cope (Blue Knot Foundation, 2018; Courtois & Ford, 2009 ).
- In addition to individual trauma, there is a need to understand collective, historic and intergenerational trauma
- Discourses surrounding trauma are entangled with a medical model of trauma symptomology, whereby survivors' responses are individualized, decontextualized and pathologized (Harper & Cromby, 2020; Johnstone & Boyle, 2018).
- Power Threat Meaning Framework (PTMF, Johnstone & Boyle, 2018) is a radical alternative to medical and diagnostic models

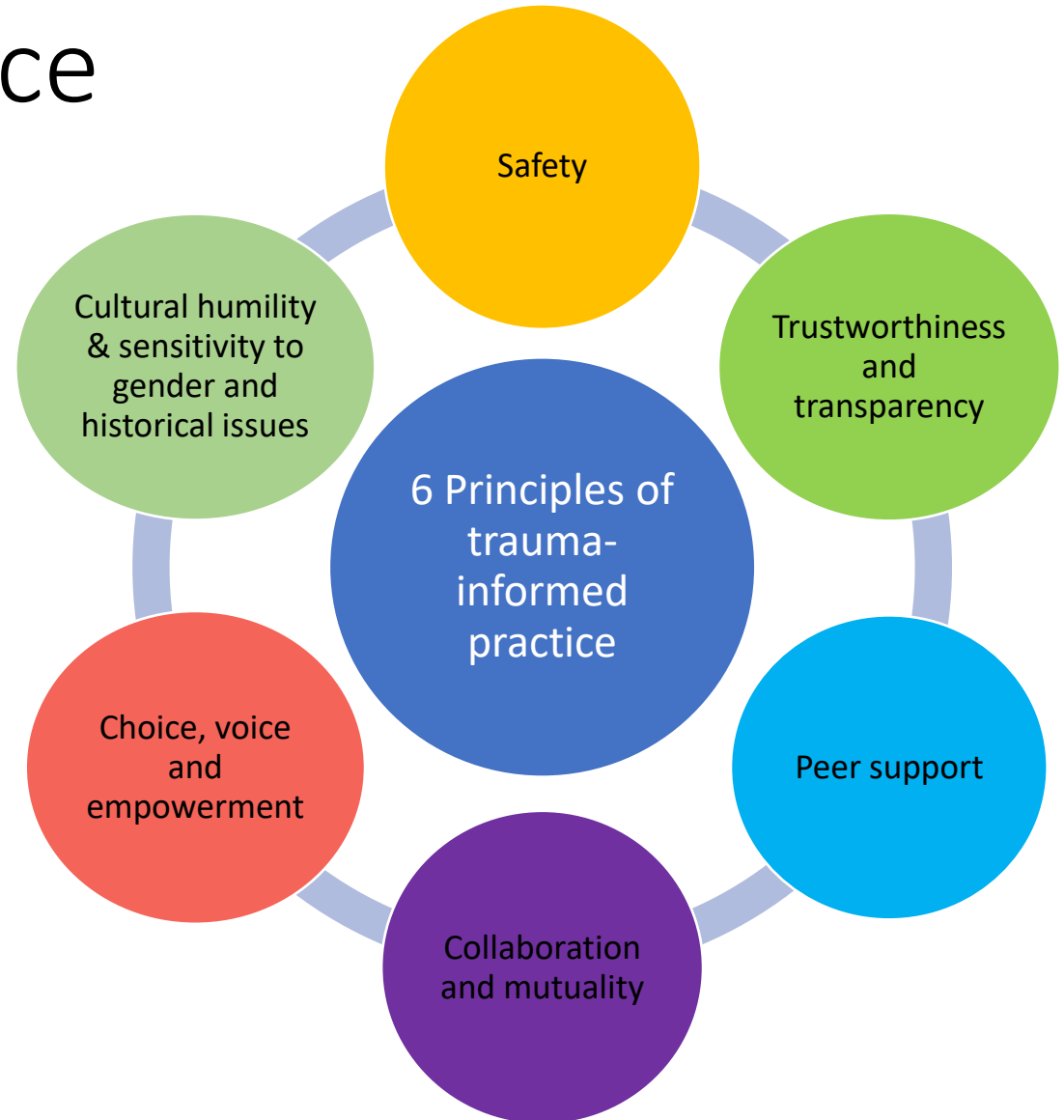
## 3 Es of Trauma



SAMHSA, 2014

# Trauma Informed Practice

- Trauma informed practice builds knowledge about trauma and its impact on mind, body and behaviour.
- Requires whole system approach, yet many studies used trauma-informed terminology to describe discrete interventions to reduce symptomology (Maynard, et al., 2019; Thomas et al, 2019)



Harris & Fallot, 2001; SAMHSA, 2014)

# The need for a paradigm shift...

- Many researchers and professionals in education embrace trauma-informed approaches, but express concern about how principles are interpreted and applied in practice.
- The PTMF recognizes that patterns of emotional distress and troubling behavior are part of a continuum of human experience, which emerge initially as ways of surviving particular threats and adversities.
- It highlights and clarifies the links between wider social factors such as poverty, discrimination and inequality, along with traumas such as abuse and violence, and the resulting emotional distress or troubled behavior.

([www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/introducing-power-threat-meaning-framework](http://www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/introducing-power-threat-meaning-framework)) .

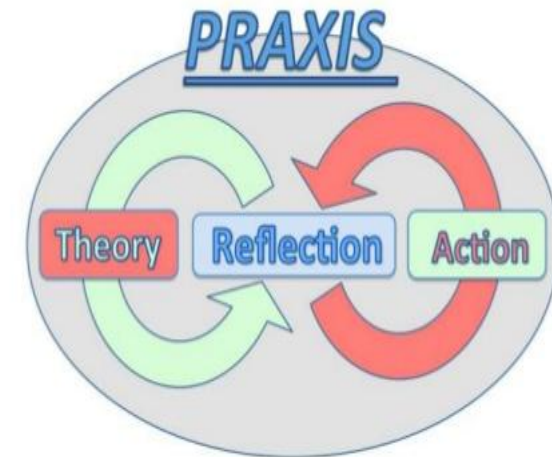


# A trauma-informed praxis?

- The PTMF highlights ways of incorporating an analysis of power into the subjective, embodied experience of distress
- Possibilities for trauma-informed work in schools to be connected to wider educational and political projects for social change.
- This orientation connects with Freirian anti-oppression education.

*“the praxis:  
reflection and action upon the world,  
in order to transform it”*

(Freire, 1970)





# A trauma-informed praxis: some concrete possibilities

- A rich contextual understanding of students' lives and a deep appreciation of the various strengths and challenges that exist in the particular communities (Alvaraz, 2017)
- Cultural humility and responsiveness (Ginwright, 2016)
- Relational pedagogies, characterised by I-thou relationships (Buber) – “being with” rather than “doing to” (Morgan, et al., 2019)
- Social action - protests, community organising, school walk-outs (Ginwright, 2016)
- Connections with curriculum and pedagogy (e.g., trauma-informed social justice math class; Kokka, 2019)



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