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Embracing a Trauma-Sensitive Approach: One School's Transformative Experience of Creating Equitable Schooling

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Abstract

One pathway to creating more equitable schooling is through schools becoming trauma sensitive. Students exposed to trauma are more likely to struggle in school compared to their non-trauma-exposed peers. Changing the school environment allows trauma-exposed students more opportunities to access academics. This qualitative study explores the practices and strategies employed by one elementary school (K–5) to become trauma sensitive. Based on the data, five subthemes emerged that coalesce around the overarching theme of creating a caring community to achieve a trauma-sensitive school. For the purposes of this study, a *caring community* is defined as a group of people sharing a common workplace who have a true interest in the well-being of others in the community. The five subthemes include (1) the faculty's commitment to creating a safe school, (2) intentional school design to foster support (covered in Ballin, 2022), (3) a commitment to engaging families, (4) a desire to make school fun, and (5) the principal's support of the school community. By embracing practices aligned with trauma-sensitive schooling, this small school changed the learning environment to give more children chances for success despite current and past traumatic experiences.

Introduction

As a matter of educational equity, schools can do more to level the playing field by adopting trauma-sensitive practices that benefit all students. Robust research suggests that economic inequality adversely affects educational opportunities and outcomes (Thorson & Gearhart, 2018) and that low-income children are disproportionally exposed to trauma, influencing these outcomes (Pataky et al., 2019). Students who are exposed to trauma are disadvantaged in a traditional school, defined here as a school that does not embrace trauma-sensitive practices. They do not do as well

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as their non-trauma-exposed peers by almost every measure (Thomas et al., 2019). Additionally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, more students were exposed to violence at home and experienced increased grief, increasing the number of students experiencing trauma (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020). Adopting trauma-sensitive practices is one way to bring more equity to educational outcomes and to avoid re-traumatizing students, which can happen when staff and faculty are not properly trained in trauma-sensitive approaches.

This case study is an in-depth analysis (Creswell, 1998) of how one low-performing K–5 elementary school, Wellington School (a pseudonym), changed some practices and reinforced others to become trauma sensitive. The principal, Mr. Goodwin (a pseudonym), led the transformation to embrace this approach because he observed students dealing with trauma on a daily basis. Additionally, before Mr. Goodwin started at Wellington, the school was in danger of a state takeover due to its consistently low test scores. Mr. Goodwin felt he had to try a different strategy. He heard about the trauma-informed approach and quickly realized this was the answer.

Through numerous professional development opportunities, the staff developed strategies and practices to support students using a trauma-sensitive framework. Although there is no one way to create a trauma-sensitive school, there are common strategies that seem to work to support students who have been exposed to trauma (Wassink-De Stigter et al., 2022).

This report is not intended as a road map for creating a trauma-sensitive school but as a way to inform educators, social workers, and other school professionals about what worked for this school and why the Wellington faculty and staff used the approach they did. The strategies employed by the school are practices that embrace the whole child within the context in which they live. The teachers saw the importance of working on their relationships with the students, the staff appeared to accept the students for who they were, and, together, the Wellington school personnel operated as one large community.

Literature Review

Exposure to trauma affects one in four children, and it may adversely impact their schooling (Crosby, 2015). *Trauma* can be broadly defined and may include chronic bullying; unstable living conditions (homelessness and multiple foster care situations, family drug addiction); witnessing violence; experiencing violence, abuse, and neglect; and dealing with loss or extreme fear of separation or loss, among other stresses (Cole et al., 2013). A seminal study by Felitti et al. (1998) brought the impact of childhood trauma to the forefront of educational research. The Felitti et al. (1998) study highlighted the prevalence of Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE), such as household dysfunction and abuse, and the negative effects ACE had on adult mental and physical health. The study reported that over half of the participants had at least one ACE. This study raised awareness that childhood trauma is prevalent in the population and that it can have significant impacts on health into adulthood.

Duplechain et al. (2008) discovered dramatic differences in reading scores between children affected by trauma and their unaffected peers. Additional impacts may include myriad behavioural and academic challenges, such as lethargy in school, aggression, irritability, and cognitive struggles (Avery et al., 2021; Milner et al., 2018). It is impossible to know which students have had exposure to trauma. Students may or may not talk about their experiences, and it is difficult to decipher whether learning or behavioural challenges result from the child experiencing or being exposed to trauma or from other causes (Milner et al., 2018). Students affected by trauma are more likely to be identified for special education, and they are 2.5 times more likely than their

peers from untraumatized backgrounds to fail a grade (Cole et al., 2009). They may exhibit a variety of behaviours that the unaware educator may view as disrespectful, "lazy," or in need of a punitive response. Milner et al. (2018) warned that unaddressed traumatic exposures may lead to further anti-social behaviours, such as drug addiction and dropping out of school.

Given the impact of trauma on learning, it is imperative to examine how schools can adjust their practices to support students affected by it. Some educators have embraced a proactive approach to educating students affected by trauma by adopting methods described as trauma-informed or trauma sensitive. The ethos of this approach asks a child, "What happened to you?" instead of "What did you do?" Cole et al. (2013) and Wassink-de Stigter et al. (2022) explained that a trauma-sensitive approach can benefit all children—not just those who are known to have experienced trauma but also those with unknown backgrounds and children with classmates who have experienced trauma. Cole et al. (2013) posited that schools have always contained children affected by trauma. However, our understanding of how trauma affects student learning has evolved, and new teaching practices have emerged to support students with trauma histories. Finding effective methods that support the teaching of all students, including those who have experienced trauma, is imperative for creating equitable schooling. The recent COVID-19 pandemic created additional trauma, emphasizing the importance of schools adopting a trauma-sensitive approach (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020). Crosby (2015) noted the importance of creating positive and caring school relationships for students exposed to trauma to counter any negative relationships and to foster students' interpersonal growth.

Cole et al. (2013) provided a definition of a trauma-sensitive school that is widely accepted in the state where Wellington School is located:

> A trauma-sensitive school is one in which all students feel safe, welcomed, and supported and where addressing trauma's impact on learning on a school-wide basis is at the center of its educational mission. An ongoing, inquiry-based process allows for the necessary teamwork, coordination, creativity, and sharing of responsibility for all students. (p. 11)

Jones et al. (2018) studied the process that five schools underwent using the Trauma and Learning Policy Initiative (TLPI) approach to transform each school's culture into a trauma-sensitive one. The design of this approach educates teachers about the impact of trauma on learning in hopes of shifting educational practices to embrace trauma sensitivity. Through this study, researchers identified six readiness indicators that demonstrate that a school could successfully move to a trauma-sensitive model. These include a whole-school approach, a sense of urgency to change, dedicated time to work on the change, and committed leadership. Further research by Wassink-De Stigter et al. (2022) noted the importance of ongoing professional development, leadership support, buy-in from school staff, and strategic infrastructure for creating a trauma-sensitive school. Many of the practices at Wellington School reflected the guidelines from these studies.

Theoretical Framework

A theory of community, developed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), focusing on "the dynamics of the sense-of-community force" (p. 1) serves as the theoretical framework for this study. In his 1976 working paper, McMillan defined a sense of community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (as cited in McMillan and

Chavis, 1986, p. 9). Additionally, McMillan and Chavis highlighted four elements that shape a sense of community. These elements are 1) membership (a sense of belonging), 2) influence (a sense of mattering), 3) reinforcement (a sense of fulfillment), and 4) shared emotional connection (shared experiences). Shared values also contribute to a sense of community, as does a feeling that one plays a meaningful part of the community. At Wellington School, a sense of community emerged as a central theme. Analyzing the dynamics of community interaction, broken down into relevant components, can help researchers to understand how the process of forming an effective trauma-sensitive school works.

Method

Research design

This case study examined one school's adoption of trauma-sensitive practices as described from the perspectives of administrators, teachers, students, and parents. Within the tradition of qualitative research, I used a variety of data-gathering techniques, such as interviews, observations, and artifacts (school records including discipline records), to triangulate the data (Berg, 2004; Stake, 2005), drawing on multiple sources of data to clarify and verify interpretations (Stake, 2005). I spent a total of 35 days over a 3-year period (2018–2020) visiting the school. During these visits, I conducted interviews, observed classrooms, wandered the halls, and attended all-school events, such as a running race, all-school community meetings, lunchtimes, and breakfasts. I interviewed a total of 15 teachers, including specialists, five parents and their children, and the principal. The typical interview lasted 30–60 minutes but varied based on the individual's available time and the amount of information that they wanted to share. Most of the interviews took place during the 2018–2019 academic year. I did not interview all teachers or visit all classrooms. The goal of my research was not to evaluate every classroom but instead to witness what a selected group of teachers in the school were doing to embrace a trauma-sensitive approach and to analyze their beliefs about this approach from different perspectives.

The principal guided my research by setting up the classroom observations with teachers who embraced the trauma-sensitive approach and parents who were supportive of his goals and the school. My plan was to interview teachers after observing their classrooms. I noted strategies employed by teachers to help students with discipline, focus, and attention, observing interactions between teachers and students as well as between students. As the opportunity arose, I conducted informal observations of interactions in the hallway and the playground. I also interviewed the principal multiple times over the course of this study, as well as other individual teachers and support faculty in the school, including the special education teacher, school psychologist, school nurse, adjustment counsellor, and behaviour specialist. To create a comfortable interview environment, I interviewed parents and their children together. The five parents I interviewed were not intended to represent all parents in the school community. The selected parents were recommended, willing to take part in the study, and agreeable to having their child interviewed as well. Pseudonyms were used for all names to respect privacy.

The principal, Mr. Goodwin, was supportive of the research and provided access to the school. My goal was to be an "invisible researcher" (Berg, 2004) and part of the fabric of the school. This took time; after many visits, I felt my status change from visitor to researcher, and I was able to observe almost unnoticed. For 3 years (2018–2020), I went to the school whenever I was welcomed. I did not decide on the number of visits or time period ahead of time but instead

paid attention to the data I collected. I noted repeating patterns and themes that began to describe the practices embraced by the school community and points at which I believed I had answered my guiding questions. The research was approved by the Internal Review Board at Simmons University.

Guiding questions

I focused on the following research questions. The questions were not intended to apply to all teachers and all parents; instead, I chose a select group to observe and interview. Therefore, my findings reflect only this group and not the entire school community.

1. To what degree are teachers and staff committed to a shared vision at the school?
2. How do teachers, parents, and students describe and embrace trauma-sensitive practices?
3. What practices are commonly used that teachers, students, administrators, and parents believe contribute to creating a trauma-sensitive school?
4. What calming and anti-anxiety strategies do students describe that have helped them focus on learning?

Research site

Wellington School (K–5), located in the northeastern United States, was one of five elementary schools in the district. Wellington School had the lowest student-to-teacher ratio at 8.6:1 when compared to the other elementary schools in the district, which ranged from 11.2:1 up to 13:1. The school maintained the largest percentage in the district of students on free and reduced lunch (80%), students receiving special education services, and students who were English Learners (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education [MDESE], 2019). The community in which the school was located, according to the principal, had a high percentage of parents who suffered from addictions, an issue that has plagued this community for years, putting these students at a higher risk for exposure to trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, n.d.).

I specifically selected this K–5 elementary school because the principal, Mr. Goodwin, welcomed me into the school, graciously offered his time to support this research, and passionately advocated for a trauma-sensitive approach. He had introduced the approach 2 years before the start of this research; therefore, the program was still new but not in its infant stages, which I determined would be a productive time frame for this study.

Wellington School's implementation of a trauma-sensitive approach is unique to Wellington. Trauma-sensitive practices are not universal, and every school adopts specific practices that fit their particular community. This was a study of the decisions, responses, and effects related to Wellington School’s adoption of trauma-sensitive practices.

Participants

All of the participants for this study were chosen by the principal, who noted that he had directed me to the teachers and parents who supported his work. Since my aim was to focus on trauma-sensitive strategies that were working in the school, this approach made sense. The nine teachers I interviewed included seven classroom teachers, a gym teacher, and a music teacher. I also selected two administrators (the principal and the reading coach) and five specialists (the school psychologist, adjustment counselor, behaviour specialist, nurse, and Therapeutic Learning Centre teacher). Two of the selected parents had leadership roles in the Parent–Teacher Organization (PTO). Four were mothers of children at the school, and one was a father who volunteered in the library. The parent/student interviews were either conducted at the school or at the parent's home, based on the parent's choice.

Data collection and analysis

Data collection included observations of classrooms and unstructured places in the school; interviews of faculty, parents, and students; and documentation from the Department of Education website regarding the school's performance and demographic information. Using multiple sources of data collection gave me a variety of perspectives from which to view the school's approaches to and successes with using a trauma-sensitive approach. For classroom observations, I focused on student–teacher interactions, discipline strategies, and student engagement. Each interview centred around consistent questions (see Appendices 1 and 2) yet allowed flexibility within the interview so that each conversation could take its own shape, allowing the interviewee to focus on what seemed most important to them. For artifacts, I used data reported on the Department of Education website and internal documents such as school suspension and absenteeism numbers from the principal.

Data analysis focused on compiling the information gathered, coding the data, arranging the codes into clumps, and looking for common themes using methods detailed in Glesne (1999). To validate the data, I used multiple methods (Glesne, 1999). These methods included the following: triangulation (using multiple sources of data collection), ample observation time at the research site, reflection on research bias, and member checking (sharing the interview transcripts and inviting participants to make corrections). I also distributed a draft of this article to all participants for comments on accuracy; none of the participants had any corrections. As a reflective practice, I kept a journal of my thoughts and reactions after each visit to the school to note my biases that might influence data collection or analysis. I read through the data multiple times, allowing the themes to emerge and noting the areas related to my research interests (Berg, 2004; Delamont, 2002).

Findings and Discussion

One overarching theme emerged from the analysis: the faculty and staff's commitment to creating and maintaining a caring school community dominated the data. I noted robust evidence that the faculty and staff intentionally created a caring community for themselves, the students, and students' families. I define a *caring community* as a group of people sharing a common workplace who have a true interest in the well-being of others in the group. This definition reflects how McMillan and Chavis (1986) described a sense of community.

Based on the analysis of the data, I identified five subthemes that supported the overarching theme of a caring community as a central tenet of the trauma-sensitive approach: 1) the faculty's commitment to creating a safe school, 2) intentional school design to foster student support (covered in Ballin, 2022), 3) a commitment to engaging families, 4) a desire to make school fun, and 5) the principal's support of the school community (see Figure 1).

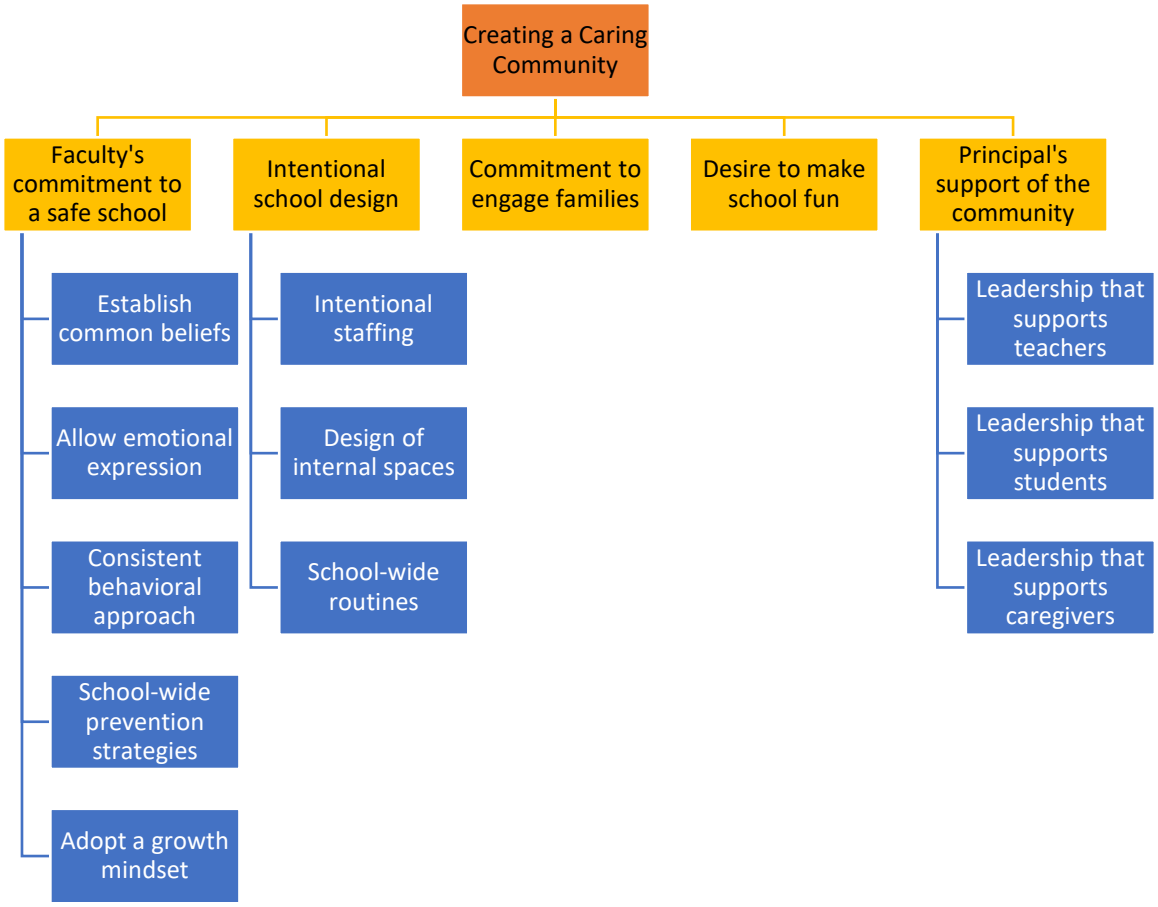


Figure 1: Themes and subthemes found in a trauma-sensitive caring community.

Theme 1: The faculty's commitment to creating a safe school

A safe learning environment is a goal for many schools because of the connections between students' emotional health and academic success. Research by Lacoe (2013) that included over 340,000 middle school students showed that when students did not feel safe in school, their academic success suffered. Students affected by trauma are particularly vulnerable to needing a safe school (Avery et al., 2021; Wassink-De Stigter et al., 2022). If students exposed to trauma are fearful in the school environment, they may see every interaction and action as a threat and react accordingly. However, students exposed to trauma can thrive in environments that create spaces where they feel safe and welcome despite the trauma they may be experiencing or may have experienced, both in school and outside the school (Halladay Goldman et al., 2020; Terrasi & de Galarce, 2017). According to Jones et al. (2018), developing a safe and supportive environment is one key attribute to creating a trauma-sensitive school. Key features of how the Wellington faculty

and staff embraced a safe environment include establishing common beliefs, accepting and allowing emotional expression, addressing behavioural concerns with a consistent approach, using school-wide prevention strategies, and adopting a growth mindset to sustain hope in learning.

Establishing common beliefs

The teachers interviewed and observed appeared to share common beliefs about the effects of trauma on learning and the importance of teaching as if every child was exposed to trauma. These shared beliefs that the faculty mentioned in interviews matched what I noted in the classroom and hallway observations. Teachers shared a belief that students expressing behavioural issues may be reacting to trauma. They also believed in the importance of creating a safe space and accepting a child's current state without blame. Shared beliefs are a cornerstone of the McMillan and Chavis (1986) framework of sense of community.

Teachers shared a common belief in maintaining high expectations for all students, including those exposed to trauma. Another common belief among the teachers was the importance of accepting students as they are and allowing space for them to talk about their feelings. Ms. Waters, the fourth-grade special education teacher, posited that the goal is to create a safe space so that students feel comfortable to "talk it out and get those feelings out."

Through multiple staff trainings, meetings, and readings, the teachers and staff at Wellington came to a shared belief system regarding the effects of trauma on learning and how they could best support students. They understood that they should no longer ask what a student had done but instead ask what had happened. This common understanding is one of the tenets of the trauma-sensitive approach described by Cole et al. (2013).

Accepting and allowing emotional expression

Cole et al. (2013) suggest using a holistic approach to addressing student behaviour that pays attention to the underlying issues. The support staff at Wellington tended to address the underlying issues, while the teachers allowed for emotional expression that might otherwise be seen as "behaviour" by not shaming or blaming the students and by knowing when to refer the student to a member of the support staff. I witnessed myriad ways, some very subtle, in which teachers at Wellington embraced children's emotions as a normal part of the day. Mrs. Steiner's classroom, the Therapeutic Learning Centre (TLC), was decorated with mirrors to "create more opportunity for self-awareness," she explained. The existence of the TLC suggested acceptance that students would have times in their day when they needed to express their emotions and receive additional support.

In addition to Mrs. Steiner's classroom, I observed teachers in the general education classroom who adapted their teaching based on an emotional assessment of their students. In one classroom, I noted—and the teacher confirmed in our interview—that she ended a math lesson prematurely because the students were not ready to learn. She commented that they could return to the lesson later.

Beyond teachers who altered their teaching or created space in their classroom for emotional expression, multiple support staff members were available to give students the time and space they needed to self-regulate. The school maintained a behaviour specialist, Ms. James, who was available as needed. When not working directly with a student in need, Mrs. O'Hara noted that "She [Ms. James] walks through [the classroom] and just gets to know them [the students] before something happens." Sue, a third-grade student, observed that Ms. James was available to

help kids calm down. Mrs. James explained her patient approach: "I'm one to wait it out until the child is ready to come with me."

The nurse showed me the designated space in her office for students to just sit and relax, explaining, "They're always going to present with the physical complaint, but then you're always trying to figure out what's behind it." She described how she might lead students in meditation or help them focus on techniques such as slow breathing. "My goal for my office is to offer a safe haven to any and all students, parents, and staff."

Ms. Tana, a parent volunteer, noted how the teachers supported the emotional well-being of the students. She commented:

> I don't necessarily know those kids [kids exposed to trauma], but I've seen them have a bad day.… And I see how the staff reacts to it.… They really dive in and try to figure out, "What is causing this?"… They treat them with respect.

The faculty and staff accepted the students' emotional states and provided numerous supports to allow students to express themselves without feeling shame or blame. This commitment aided in the school's overall pledge to create a caring school community, which is a central theme in embracing a trauma-sensitive approach. McMillan and Chavis (1986) described a shared emotional connection as integral to building a sense of community. Teachers and staff at Wellington allowed and encouraged emotional expression, knowing its importance for learning.

Consistency in addressing behavioural concerns

Wiest-Stevenson and Lee (2016) noted the importance of consistency and routine within a positive behavioural program to support students affected by trauma. This consistency helps to create a sense of safety because the expectations are clear. In my observations and conversations with teachers, I witnessed a consistent behavioural approach that encouraged "doing the right thing." During my classroom observations, I noted the same behaviour chart at the front of every room on which teachers moved the student's name up and down—though overwhelmingly students were moved up—according to the student's behaviour. In most classes, once students reached the highest level, a note was sent home to the parent in celebration. Multiple times, I saw teachers praise students for "doing the right thing." For example, Ms. Green, the music teacher, moved students on the chart often during the class, praising and thanking students for the expected behaviour, and addressing noncompliance in a friendly tone: "My friends in the back, we have moved to red, but we can pop back up at any time when I see you doing the right thing."

Teachers interviewed explained that every day, when students came into the room, they got a fresh start. All children started on "green," ready to learn. The music teacher pointed out that the system worked well because everyone used it. She noted, "They [the students] know what to expect in every classroom, so it's not a surprise, because we know with our trauma-sensitive kids, we don't want to have surprises." During interviews, students clearly and consistently showed that they understood the behaviour chart system. Consistency throughout the school set students up for success because expectations were shared by all students and staff.

School-wide prevention strategies

I observed consistent school-wide approaches to teaching students strategies for dealing emotions. As Ms. Green noted, "It's better to teach the kids tools that they can use in order to get back on track or just get away from what they're thinking emotionally than it is to just constantly be calling home or having them do extra work." Some of the strategies were implemented within classrooms,

and others were used in common spaces. In classrooms, I noted use of meditation, modeling of stress reduction, and teaching of self-regulation. Whole-school strategies involved rewarding positive behaviour.

All classes I observed engaged in some form of meditation, using techniques faculty had learned in professional development sessions. Students seamlessly got quiet and settled when preparing for a classroom meditation. Sue (Ms. Tana's daughter) explained regarding meditation, "It helps me, like if I have a lot of energy or something or I was mad or sad, it helps me calm down from those big emotions that I'm expressing."

In an example of a prevention strategy, I observed the first-grade teacher acknowledging off-task behaviour and then offering a solution: "We are a little out of control. Should we do a movement break to get our wiggles out?" She gave the class a choice about which activity they wanted to do. She joined the students in a music video dance, and then the students quietly went off to music class. There was no scolding of the children's behaviour but instead an acknowledgment that the students needed a movement break.

Other examples of self-regulation strategies included Ms. Green instructing students to "put their bubbles on" as they entered and moved about the room, meaning they filled their checks with air, which prevented them from talking during these tasks. The gym teacher, Mrs. Kye, instructed students to maintain control and personal space when they ran around the gym using a scaffolding approach that started with walking, then moved to skipping, and finally ended with running. She clearly stated her expectations, complimenting and acknowledging students who did the right thing. Mrs. Kye also taught yoga to every student during a gym class. The classroom teachers were asked to participate so that the students could continue with yoga during the regular school day. Multiple research studies have suggested that regular yoga practice in schools decreases stress and increases self-esteem and self-regulation (Bazzano et al., 2020; Butzer et al., 2016; Eggleston, 2015; Stapp & Lambert, 2020). Rashedi and Schonert-Reichl (2019) argued that self-regulation predicts outcomes and has been associated with student success in school.

Encouragement of positive behaviours in common spaces included strategies such as the Yacker Tracker and Eagle Tickets, which allowed students to monitor and correct their own behaviour. Rather than yelling "Be quiet!" as heard in many school cafeterias, Mr. Goodwin, the principal, used the large "Yacker Tracker" mounted on the wall in the cafeteria, which looked like a stoplight. The goal was to keep the volume low enough so the Tracker stayed in green. If the students kept it in green, they earned an ice cream party at the end of the week.

Another system to encourage positive behaviour was Eagle Tickets. One student described how, if students "do something good in class … you stay after, help clean or whatever, the teacher will write out your name, what class you are in and check off what you did.… Then they put them in this box." A name would be pulled out during morning meeting, and the entire class received a reward, such as extra recess time. Positive systems to encourage "doing the right thing" can increase a sense of belonging, which is an important aspect of McMillan and Chavis's (1986) framework.

Adopting a growth mindset to sustain hope in learning

Many of the teachers I interviewed embraced the language of a growth mindset to help students develop a sense of hope about their academic potential. Haimovitz and Dweck (2017) posited that direct teaching of a growth mindset improves academic performance: when students embrace a growth mindset, they feel they can develop new skills and knowledge through effort and persistence. Mrs. Steiner, the TLC teacher, explained the brain's functions to her students, with

posters and diagrams displayed prominently in her room that showed parts of the brain and neuron connections, and used growth mindset language to help students understand how they could control their actions by making new neuron connections. She described a student who had a math phobia. Every time the math teacher asked the students to take out the math textbook, the student reacted in an inappropriate way. Ms. Steiner told the student, "We're going to cut that [the bad connection] because you're not going to do that. You're going to make another connection to a neuron." She demonstrated this change using pictures of neurons and scissors to cut and change the connections. She then told the student that the new connection was simply to tell the teacher that she did not like math. Ms. Steiner explained that this method was effective in helping students change the way they responded.

The language of a growth mindset was used throughout the school. Ms. Green reported that she used growth mindset concepts in music class, letting students know that the work was hard but that they were "going to practice and keep practicing until they get it, and they will get it." With growth mindset language, students understood mistakes as learning, which further contributed to a safe learning environment.

Overall, evidence of commitment to creating a safe learning environment appeared in the expressed beliefs and practices of the faculty in this study. I observed throughout that teachers understood the effects of trauma and the importance of allowing for emotional expression, maintaining a positive, consistent behavioural system, and using growth mindset language to provide a sense of control over learning, thereby enhancing a sense of safety.

Theme 2: Intentional school design to foster student support

A second important subtheme in creating a trauma-sensitive caring community is using intentional school design to foster support. The term *intentional design* refers to specific structures and systems in the school that support a trauma-sensitive environment. The structures I noted through observations and interviews involved intentional staffing; design of internal spaces, including classrooms; and school-wide routines. In this article, I will only note that intentional design was an integral part of how the school fully embraced a trauma-sensitive approach. The design-related details of this research are discussed in Ballin (2022).

Theme 3: A commitment to engaging families

A third vital subtheme in building community to support a trauma-sensitive approach is engaging students' families. For Wellington, engaging families is part of the ethos of the school. The five families that I interviewed consistently mentioned the connection with and love they felt for the school, despite its negative reputation in the town for poor discipline and academic performance. After sending their children to the school, parents found a caring school community that interviewees often described as an extended family.

The family focus brought one family back to the school after they had moved out of the district. After only seven months in a new school, the parents decided to move their daughter back to Wellington largely because of the community, which they felt was lacking at the new school. Ms. Patton, the student's mother, explained that Wellington felt "family-focused," saying, "The vibe being in the school is so positive that I can't imagine us being anywhere else." I observed that she used the word "us" even though her daughter was the one going to the school.

One former student, Kathy, described her connection to the teachers: "They [teachers] knew your family and knew what you did outside of school.… They knew your background stories and… your friends from different schools. They acted like part of your family." Kathy noted that the teachers ensured that students who came into school sad due to family issues were helped during the day "so by the end of the day they were wicked happy and [didn't] feel like [they were] going home to a mess."

The families felt supported economically as well as emotionally. The Eagle's Nest, a "store" within the school, was "full of donated clothes that families [could] take as they [needed]," according to one parent, Ms. Hat. Additionally, a local food pantry supplied food every Friday for families in need. Ms. Hat also shared a personal story about the level of caring from the teachers during a stressful financial time, when her family had lost income due to a government shutdown. Another parent spoke of receiving baby gifts from the teachers for her newborn, and another, Ms. Tana, said, "We really feel like this is an extension of our family."

The teachers I interviewed confirmed that they made a conscious, ongoing effort to connect with the students. Ms. Elnor pointed out that the connections paid off: "I feel like those connections and community that we're building are really helping them with their social–emotional struggles, with their home lives." Research by Rucinski et al. (2018) suggests that the caring teacher relationship supports students' social-emotional well-being along with their academic development. The consistent message from the five families I interviewed was the tremendous support they felt from the teachers and the principal. The sense of belonging, as noted in the McMillan and Chavis (1986) community framework, is clear when parents and students alike describe being part of a family.

Theme 4: A desire to make school fun

Along with embracing families as part of their caring community, a noticeable subtheme was Wellington's intention to make school a fun place to be. In interviews, both parents and students often talked about the school being fun, describing ritual activities at the school, from a traditional Halloween family event to the Turkey Trot run around the school and holiday concerts.

I observed that breakfast time had a festive feel, with loud music playing, a teacher dancing. and groups of students gathered informally. Mr. Goodwin, the principal, maintained a dominant presence, using a megaphone as he greeted each student by name over the music as they walked into the gym. He often made a comment as well, such as "Nice haircut" or "Come in and get some breakfast." He maintained order with a gentle style ("Put the ball back, buddy"), and in between greetings, he made jokes. Mr. Goodwin described how much he enjoyed breakfast as an informal time he could sit with the students and get to know them.

Along with these informal activities, there were a number of after-school clubs, all organized by volunteers, such as a running club, as well as a Frisbee club that Mr. Goodwin led. The importance of school being fun was emphasized by the whole Wellington community. School can be challenging, especially for students from trauma backgrounds; making school fun engages the students and makes them want to be there.

Theme 5: The principal's support of the school community

An integral part of each of these subthemes was the school principal, Mr. Goodwin. From interviews and observations, I witnessed not only Mr. Goodwin's commitment to the entire school

community but also his support of teachers, students, and parents in the quest to create a trauma-sensitive school.

Leadership that supports teachers

All teachers I interviewed consistently expressed their gratitude for the support they received from Mr. Goodwin. Teachers noted that he gave them agency to do their work, created a positive working environment, and set a tone for educational advancement. The reading teacher, Ms. Stout, explained,

> We are given the permission from Mr. Goodwin to take the first 10 minutes of every day and make sure that anyone who might be in that fight-or-flight mentality to just take the time to kind of settle in, realize they're safe, they're okay, because it does take time.

The teachers felt trusted by Mr. Goodwin to make the best decisions for their students. This may include spending class time on meditation and connection with the students, if that was what the teacher felt was needed.

Ms. Corno noted that Mr. Goodwin sent out "positive emails" along with articles on topics such as trauma, students coming from different countries, and best practices, with his own "breakdown" of the content. She described how he was on the forefront and "always looking for that next step and that next way to help the kids."

Mr. Patton, a parent, summed up the importance of leadership that supported the school community. He commented, "I feel like the reason you have all these positive influences, happy, successful teachers is because they're getting the support and guidance they need from the top. That trickles down to our children."

Leadership that supports students

A leader who is not only an administrator but also understands and interacts with students is a key asset to the trauma-sensitive approach. Mr. Goodwin was consistently described by both students and parents as fun and accessible. Kathy (a former student) explained, "He [Principal Goodwin] played music on Fridays, the songs that are popular now. He always tried to fit in with the kids." One parent noted that the kids "seek him out." She related how different this was from days when children were afraid of the principal. A parent explained that Mr. Goodwin was not only at all the concerts and events but that he also cheered the kids on. She noted, "They [the students] know he's their biggest fan." The students observed that he ate lunch with them every day. This principal was integrated into the students' lives by connecting with them, giving them a sense of belonging which supported the caring school community commitment.

Leadership that supports caregivers

All the caregivers I interviewed expressed how the school was like a family. Mr. Patton explained:

> He [Principal Goodwin] knows what I do for work and everything. So he'll ask, "Hey, how was your shift? How's your week been?" My week's been kind of tough. He'll listen just even for that three-minute conversation.… It goes a long way.

Ms. Tana observed that parents in other district schools noticed the principal at Wellington and saw him as "the cool principal, and that Wellington does all these different things for all kids.

Not just kids that need it, but other kids can benefit from the same practices." The caregivers consistently described the school as an extended family.

Academic student growth in the trauma-sensitive approach

Although quantitative analysis of measures of student growth was beyond the scope of this study, in the five years of Wellington adopting the trauma-sensitive approach, improvements were evident. According to Mr. Goodwin, individual student growth increased, as measured on the yearly Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System (MCAS) assessments, student attendance improved, and the number of suspensions decreased. In the last year of this study, the student growth numbers rose from below average to above average and average in all grades and for all subjects (MDESE, 2019). While the academic statistics were not yet where the principal would like, he saw progress since the implementation of a trauma-informed approach.

Limitations of the Research

Limitations to this study include the fact that this was a case study of one school. Furthermore, as a result of my research goals, I did not interview all members of the school community, and the principal directed my access to specific study participants. Therefore, I did not interview teachers, students, or caregivers who might have been less enthusiastic about the school and its trauma-sensitive approach. This research is not intended to suggest that the strategies and frameworks used by Wellington are the best or the only methods for creating a trauma-sensitive approach. The study is intended to analyze one example of a school that transformed their culture into one that shows caring and compassion for the students, teachers, and caregivers. Future research on the impact of trauma-sensitive schools should include a larger sample size in a broader range of types of schools, including high schools and middle schools.

Implications

Sadin (2020) described the need for a revolution in schools to care for children exposed to trauma, whose needs have been ignored at best and who at worst have been re-traumatized within the confines of traditional schooling. Sadin (2020) called on school leaders to ignite this revolution by embracing a trauma-sensitive approach, which includes providing support for teachers, students, and caregivers. Embracing a trauma-informed approach can benefit the entire school community, even if not all students have been affected by trauma. However, Sadin (2020) noted that 1 in 4 school-age children have been affected by trauma. These traumatized children are those that make up the achievement gap. While incorporating this approach is not intended or able to solve all problems that confront schools, it provides a framework that can support students and decrease re-traumatization. This research highlights a trauma-sensitive approach's many benefits for the students, caregivers, and teachers at Wellington School. Importantly, it also shows specific practices that a school can embrace that will offer students affected by trauma a better chance of success.

Conclusion

Development into a trauma-sensitive school can take many forms. The practices and strategies embraced by Wellington School to achieve trauma sensitivity culminated in an overarching theme of creating a caring community. Many aspects of how Wellington School practiced a trauma-sensitive approach fall within this framework of creating a sense of community (McMillan & Clavis, 1986). The teachers shared common beliefs, they had a sense of a common mission to support students exposed to trauma, and their work to create a sense of community was felt by both students and caregivers, both of whom described Wellington as family.

The faculty and staff have created a school that works for the students who attend Wellington by changing attitudes, structures, and interactions to create the best learning environment for students who have experienced trauma. Through this, the faculty at Wellington School have increased equity in the educational environment. They have shown that changes can be made—simple changes, such as adjusting to treat behaviour as information that should be understood and not blaming a child for their behaviour. This understanding can alter the need for exclusionary discipline techniques that create inequitable schooling. Wellington's approach allows students who suffer from trauma to have more opportunities to participate in school, thereby increasing their chances of finding academic success. Wellington has set an example that can show other schools how to provide an equitable educational experience for all learners, inclusive of students who have experienced trauma.

Author Bio

Dr. Amy Ballin's career as an educator has spanned over 30 years, from teaching science education to working as a school counsellor for children with language-based learning disabilities to her current position at Walker Solutions as Senior Consultant and Trainer. While performing the research for this article, Dr. Ballin's worked at Simmons University as an Assistant Professor in the Special Education department. Ballin's scholarly interests include a focus on creative approaches to teaching pedagogy and social action to eradicate injustices embedded within our educational system. She believes in connecting the social and emotional lives of children with their academic success and in designing teaching methods to engage a wide range of educators on finding solutions for teaching children rather than blaming them. Her research area and interests include exploring how racial and socioeconomic assumptions intersect with the social construction of special education. Dr. Ballin's book, *The Quest for Meaningful Special Education,* explores these concepts in depth. Dr. Ballin has devoted her career to promoting equity in education.

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Appendix 1

Interview Questions for Teachers and Administration

1. How long have you been at the school?
2. What is your role?
3. How do you understand the trauma-sensitive approach?
4. Tell me about your training in the trauma-sensitive approach.
5. What have you implemented in your classroom that supports the trauma-sensitive approach?
6. How have you altered your teaching based on the trauma-sensitive approach?
7. Tell me about your training to prepare you for the trauma-sensitive approach.
8. What does the trauma-sensitive approach mean to you?
9. Based on my observation, I was wondering … ?

Appendix 2

Interview Questions for Parents and Children

For Caregivers

Tell me what you like about Wellington.
What is challenging at Wellington?
Tell me about your involvement at Wellington.
What do you notice about the culture or atmosphere at the school?
Describe your level of involvement at the school.
What do you know about the trauma-informed approach at the school?

For Students

What is your favorite thing about Wellington?
What is your least favorite thing about Wellington?
What do you know about the trauma-sensitive approach?
What do you know about meditation?
Tell me about what teachers do when students do not follow the rules.