Billabongs of Knowledge in School Systems

Trauma Aware Education Conference

Brisbane October 29, 2026



THE SEEDLING GROUP

Southern Cross University

TRAUMA-AWARE EDUCATION

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Acknowledgement

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Introductions



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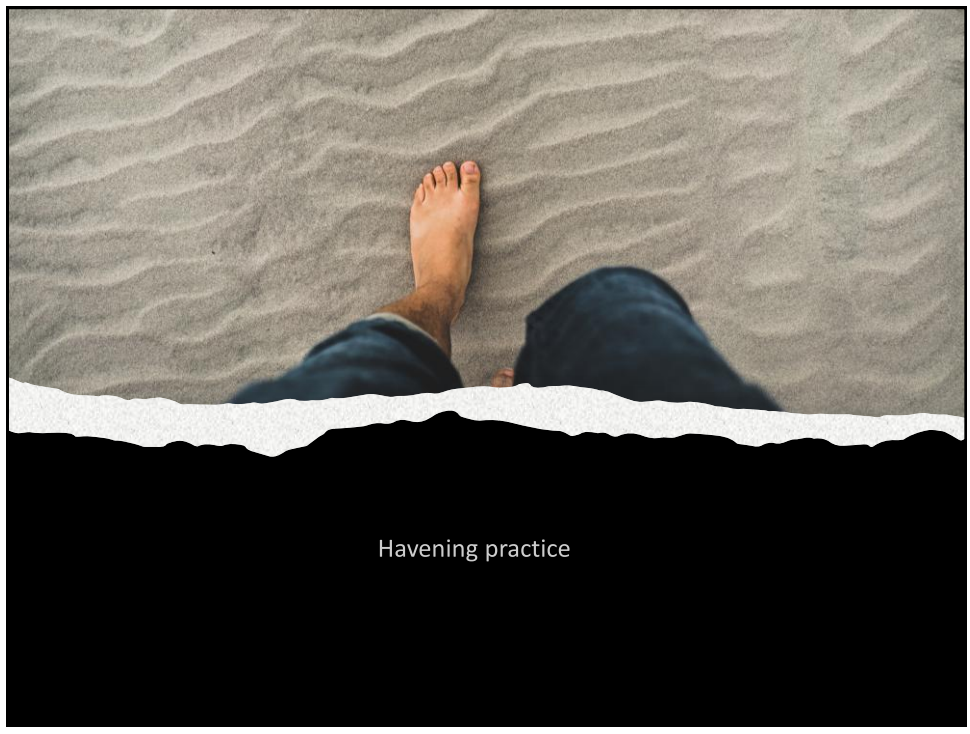

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The challenge…

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We have made our educators frontline workers

- Rising complexity
- Escalating behaviour referrals
- Staff overwhelm
- Limited levers for change

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Key Research Findings

FIGURE 2 Summary of key statistical findings on Australian teacher burnout and retention

Focus Area	Cohort & Design	Key Statistic / Finding	Primary Risk Drivers
Occupational Stress Carroll2022	749 Australian school teachers (Cross-[illegible])	>50% reported extreme job stress	Administrative workload, emotion dysregulation
Compassion Fatigue Oberg2024	1,939 K–12 and early educators	46.96% experienced moderate burnout	Student trauma exposure, secondary stress
Psychological Distress Corbett2023	1,126 NSW primary/secondary teachers	>30% demonstrated high burnout	Working >60 hours weekly, female gender
Long-Term Retention Heffernan2022	2,444 Australian teachers nationwide	Only 41% planned to remain in teaching	Heavy workload, declining professional status
Early Attrition Carroll2022	National workforce data review	8% to 50% leave within first five years	Resource scarcity, role isolation, job demands

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Greater than the sum of its parts

Polycrisis

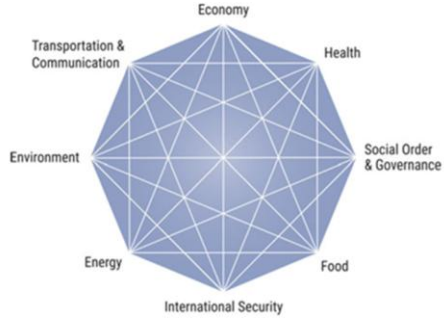

Figure design by Jacob Buurma, Vibrant Content

Lawrence M, Homer-Dixon T, Janzwood S, Rockström J, Renn O, Donges JF (2024). Global polycrisis: the causal mechanisms of crisis entanglement. Global Sustainability 7, e6, 1–16. https://doi.org/ 10.1017/sus.2024.1

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What young people are telling us…

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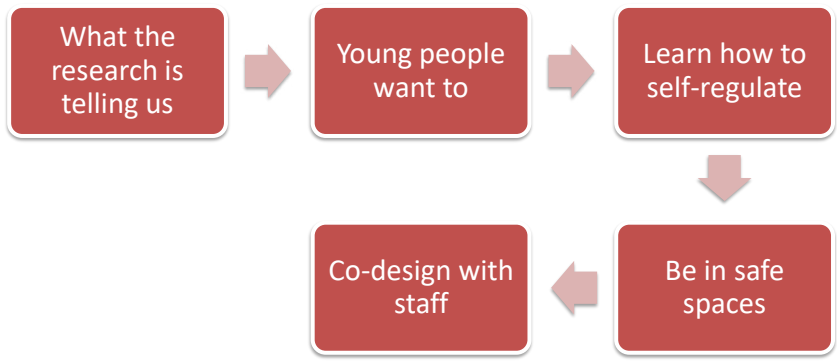
Australian **Safe Spaces** research
A/Prof Sarah Hetrick



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What are "Positive Childhood Experiences?"

The study identified 7 key experiences during childhood (01-18 years):

1. Being able to talk to family about feelings
2. Feeling family support during difficult times
3. Enjoying community traditions
4. Feeling a sense of belonging at school
5. Feeling supported by friends
6. Having at least 2 caring non-parent adults
7. Feeling safe and protected at home

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Relationship Building

Young people are losing the ability to build relationships

What happens when parents cannot demonstrate repair at home?

3rd generation neuro-diverse

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Quiet Reflection

Do I have the resources to create safe spaces around young people I work with?

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Rethinking Trauma

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Types of Trauma that inform this conversation



- Developmental Trauma
- Single Incident Trauma
- Complex Trauma
- Intergenerational Trauma
- Collective Trauma
- Historical Trauma
- Institutional Trauma
- Identity Trauma – (Recognition Theory)
- Racial Trauma
- Birthing Trauma
- Environmental trauma

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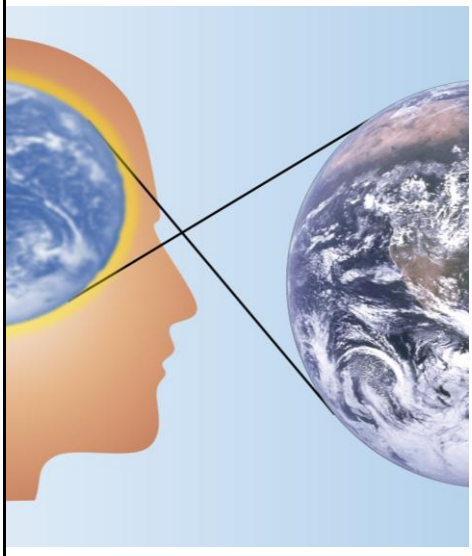

Indigenous Worldviews on Trauma

Collective and Intergenerational Trauma

Trauma is shared, intergenerational, linked to community, culture, and kinship, beyond individual impact.

Impact of Colonisation

Colonisation and systemic discrimination have layered trauma affecting identity, belonging, and spiritual connections.

Dislocation Theory (Alexander)

Identity Trauma (Recognition Theory)

Identity allows a person to function within society without shame and with the ability to exercise one's own personal identity. Honneth equates personal identity to love, equal treatment in law and self-esteem.

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The Core Question Shift

From: ‘How do we stop this behaviour?’

To: ‘How does safety and connection influence regulation?’

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Belonging changes everything…

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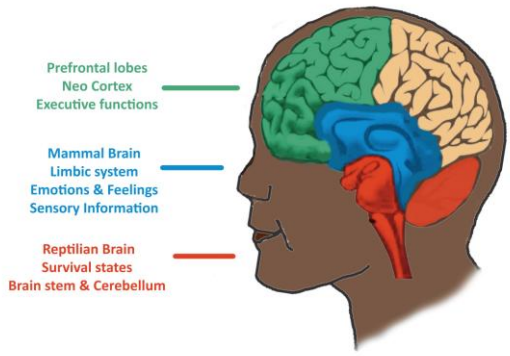
Belonging is a whole brain activity

When the brain and body register…
"I'm safe here to bring my whole self"



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Creating safe schools

Relationships are the strongest protective factor in the PCE study

Culture is a protective factor – think intergenerationally

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Culture is a protective factor…

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Bringing Cultural Identity into the Classroom Interrupts Racial Trauma

Nature of Racial Trauma

Racial trauma results from ongoing racism, discrimination, and systemic exclusion experienced by First Nations Peoples.

Manifestations in Education

In schools, racial trauma may appear as withdrawal or resistance, often mistaken for behavioral problems.

Impact of Culturally Unsafe Classrooms

Classrooms that dismiss cultural identity or prioritise Western perspectives can perpetuate racial trauma. Students need to be able to see themselves in the curriculum.

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Bringing Cultural Practices into the Classroom Builds Resilience

Indigenous cultural practices foster resilience and sustain wellbeing despite ongoing challenges and trauma.

Culturally Attuned Education rejects 'othering'

Captain Cook arrived to thriving culture.

Educator Strategies

Educators who practice self-location and challenge norms, build respectful, culturally attuned relationships.

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See, Validate and Value Culture



Western Bulldogs Website 2022 Welcome to Country

Garbor Máte – culture is regulation

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Challenge the Safe Calendar

That is govt recognised, well-resourced and safe to teach

Safe Calendar	What's Missing?
NAIDOC WEEK	Moments of resistance
Sorry Day	Protests
Reconciliation Week	political truth-telling
Indigenous Literacy Week	ongoing injustice
	The cost of the ongoing struggle

The ULANG Effect, Jordyn Green, a Wiradjuri, Ngemba and Paakantji teacher and educator (webpage and resources)

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What Culturally safe Trauma-informed practice can look like

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Psychological Safety in Classrooms

- Predictability
- Voice
- Flexible participation
- Encouraging group work and problem solving
- Visual and Oral storytelling supports
- Be aware of health implications of learning e.g. Indigenous high rates of otitos media
- Lack of sleep – overcrowding in housing

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Explicitly Teaching Regulation

Embedded skills:

- Emotional literacy – emotions wheel and window of tolerance allows you to problem solve
- Nervous system awareness
- Help-seeking
- Learning how to self-regulate
- Learning how to co-regulate
- Teaching peer relationship building skills

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Self-regulation is a powerful buffer against educator burnout

- Recognise emotions
- Predict the associated cognitions and behaviors
- choose an appropriate response which fosters Interpersonal relationships

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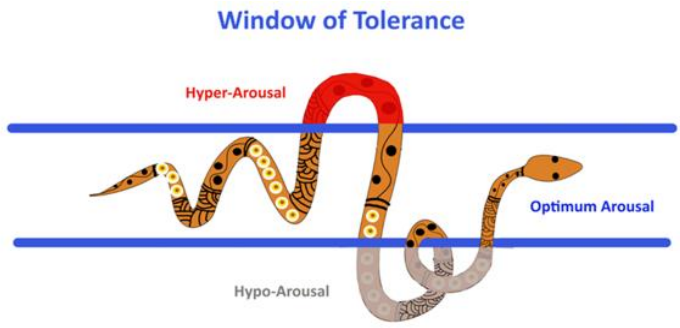

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Source: The Window of Tolerance © The Seedling Group 2022; artwork Donna Hensen
Adapted from Dan Siegel, 1999.

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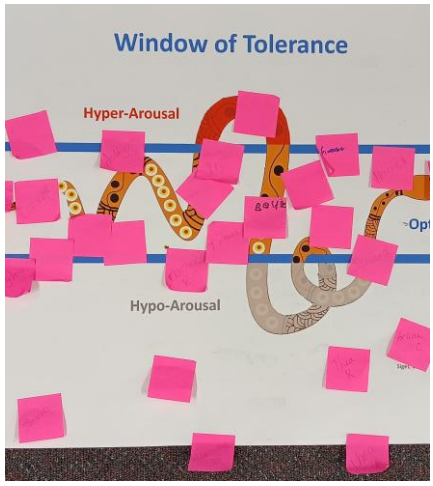
Responses that build Safety rather than Compliance



Common shifts across schools:

- Restorative conversations
- Co-regulation and self-regulation practices
- Behaviour support planning – window of tolerance

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Collective ways of doing



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Do a sensory check-in

Photo by Karsten Winegeart on Unsplash

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Culturally Safe Trauma-informed Schools…

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Tagai College Torres Strait

Understanding what's happening with your body, so let's go for a walk (Tagai State College response).

Murri School Tree



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Culturally Safe Spaces

Multiple generations (symbiotic relationships)

Indigenous only

Invite Families, Community and Elders to visit the space and share stories

Art and cultural activities

Engage with heritage (language, place, stories, songlines) – see their identity reflected

Learn without fear of discrimination

Avoid cultural appropriation

Not being the minority

Spaces that create belonging

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Supporting the people who do the work…

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Why this Room Matters…

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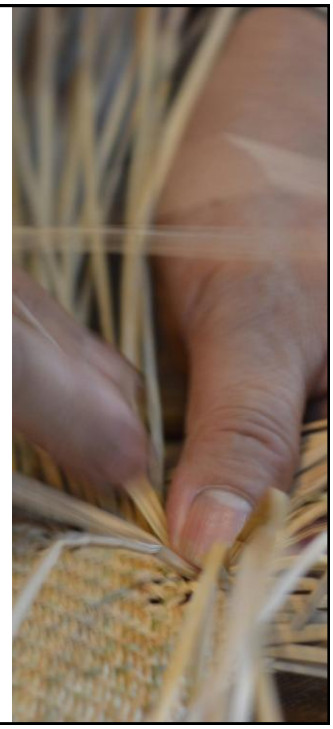
You are the threads that weave between:

- Students
- Classrooms
- Families
- Communities
- Systems



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Effectiveness of Trauma-Informed Practice on Burnout

Evidence Strength	Claim
Moderate	Trauma-informed training significantly reduces emotional exhaustion and educator burnout across school settings Kim2021Maclochlainn2022Sayers2025.
Moderate	Perceived trauma-informed knowledge predicts lower personal, student-related, and work-related burnout among Australian educators Cicco2026Oberg2024Cunneen2024.
Moderate	Trauma-informed pedagogical frameworks foster educator well-being, self-efficacy, and retention in trauma-affected classrooms Brunzell2022McConville2026McMakin et al 2022.

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System responses are shared responsibility

Become Culturally-Safe and Trauma-Informed	Reflective supervision (EAP)	Reduced admin load
Culturally-safe Assessments	Self-Care	Shared responsibility – daily decisions, conversations and judgements

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Sustainable work and careers are built by supporting people to navigate the complexity of the Australian context as it arises, in real time.

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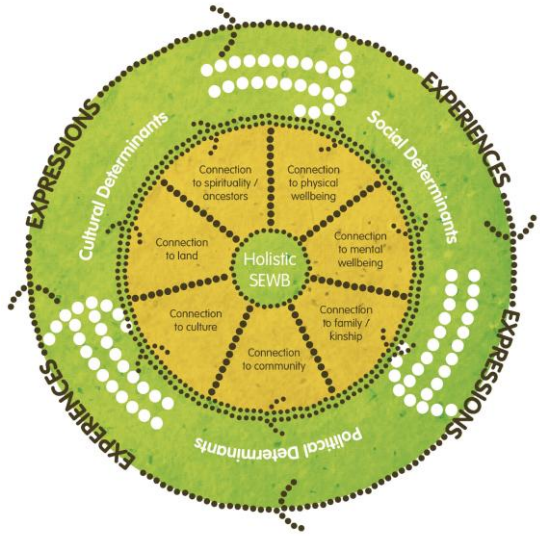

Figure 1. Social and emotional wellbeing wheel (Gee, Dudgeon, Schultz, Hart & Kelly, 2014)

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What next?

Only 45% to 55% of Australian teachers receive any formal trauma-informed training, averaging fewer than two hours of instruction **Sayers2025**

Teachers are more likely to support trauma-informed care when they feel emotionally healthy, valued, and supported themselves. Burnout and emotional fatigue make it much harder for teachers to engage positively with trauma-informed approaches.

School counsellors have a valuable opportunity to lead trauma-informed practice across schools, and effective preparation programs can support them to develop the skills and confidence required to drive whole-school change **Brown2025**.

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Cultural Safety: the most common voiced concern is “I’m afraid to make a mistake …”

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