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Impact of Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices on Student Engagement and Classroom Behavior

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Abstract

Trauma-informed teaching is essential in today's classrooms because it recognizes the profound impact that adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) such as poverty, abuse, neglect, violence, and displacement have on students' cognitive, emotional, and social development. This approach prioritizes creating safe, supportive, and predictable learning environments that foster trust and emotional security. This study investigates the impact of trauma-informed teaching practices on student engagement and classroom behavior in public secondary schools of Dera Ismail Khan and Tank districts. Grounded in pragmatic research philosophy and employing a quantitative, cross-sectional survey design, the study gathered data from 357 teachers using a structured questionnaire. The findings revealed significant positive correlations between trauma-informed practices and both student engagement and classroom behavior. Regression analyses further confirmed that trauma-informed approaches are strong predictors of improved behavioral and academic participation outcomes. These results highlight the critical need for embedding trauma-responsive strategies in teacher training and school policy to support learners affected by

adversity. The study contributes to the growing body of research advocating for emotionally safe and inclusive learning environments.

Keywords: *Trauma-Informed Teaching, Student Engagement, Classroom Behavior*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the education sector has increasingly acknowledged the profound effects of trauma on students' emotional, behavioral, and academic development. Children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)—such as domestic violence, neglect, abuse, or the death of a loved one—often carry invisible emotional burdens that influence how they behave and learn in school environments (Subica et al., 2021). These experiences can lead to difficulties with concentration, emotional regulation, peer relationships, and classroom engagement. Traditional pedagogical methods, which frequently emphasize uniform expectations and discipline, often fall short in addressing the complex needs of trauma-affected students (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2020). To respond to these challenges, schools have begun adopting **trauma-informed teaching practices**, which center on building supportive, predictable, and empathetic learning environments. This educational approach emphasizes emotional safety, positive teacher-student relationships, and restorative discipline strategies aimed at fostering resilience rather than punishment (Thomas et al., 2023). Teachers trained in trauma-informed strategies are more likely to recognize trauma symptoms, avoid re-traumatization, and use inclusive methods that engage students more effectively. Research over the past few years has shown a consistent association between trauma-sensitive classroom practices and improved student outcomes. These outcomes include increased participation, reduced behavioral disruptions, and enhanced emotional regulation among students exposed to trauma (Alisic et al., 2020; Hinnefeld, 2022). By integrating trauma-informed methods, educators not only improve classroom climate but also contribute to equitable learning conditions for all students, regardless of their personal histories. This study explores how trauma-informed teaching practices influence **student engagement and classroom behavior**. By examining this relationship, the research aims to provide evidence-based insight for educators, school leaders, and policymakers seeking to create emotionally responsive classrooms that support both academic achievement and student well-being.

The modern classroom is increasingly shaped by a diverse range of student experiences, many of which include exposure to trauma. Whether stemming from abuse, neglect, family instability, community violence, or displacement, trauma can severely disrupt a child's sense of safety and ability to learn. When left unaddressed, these experiences can manifest as disengagement from learning and disruptive classroom behavior, both of which hinder academic progress and create stressful environments for teachers and peers alike (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2020; Subica et al., 2021).

Trauma-informed teaching has emerged as a practical and empathetic response to these challenges. This approach equips educators with the understanding and tools to recognize trauma responses, foster psychological safety, and build trust with students. Instead of punitive discipline or one-size-fits-all instruction, trauma-informed teaching prioritizes empathy, consistency, emotional support, and relationship-building (Thomas et al., 2023). By reshaping

classroom dynamics around these principles, teachers can better manage student behavior while creating conditions that encourage participation and academic engagement.

There is growing evidence that trauma-informed classrooms can significantly improve **student engagement**—defined as the level of interest, motivation, and active participation in learning tasks—and also reduce problematic classroom behavior, such as defiance, inattention, or aggression (Alisic et al., 2020; Hinnefeld, 2022). When students feel safe, respected, and understood, they are more likely to attend regularly, collaborate with peers, respond positively to instruction, and show emotional regulation. Conversely, trauma-insensitive practices often lead to student withdrawal, frequent outbursts, or behavioral referrals that only deepen educational disparities. This study aims to investigate the impact of trauma-informed teaching practices on student engagement and classroom behavior, focusing on how educator awareness and response to trauma influence students' emotional connection to learning and their behavioral adjustment in classroom settings. The findings will contribute to the development of more inclusive, responsive, and effective teaching strategies that prioritize not only academic success but also the emotional well-being of every learner. Following research objectives are developed:-

1. To examine the implementation of trauma-informed teaching practices in school classrooms.
2. To explore the relationship between trauma-informed teaching practices and student engagement.
3. To analyze the influence of trauma-informed practices on students' classroom behavior.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Understanding Childhood Trauma and Its Educational Implications

Childhood trauma, often resulting from experiences such as abuse, neglect, household instability, or exposure to violence, has been recognized as a major factor affecting students' emotional and cognitive development. Students impacted by trauma often exhibit symptoms such as anxiety, hypervigilance, difficulty concentrating, and erratic behavior, which interfere with their learning and social interactions (Subica et al., 2021). These manifestations frequently go unnoticed or are misinterpreted as behavioral issues, leading to disciplinary actions rather than supportive interventions. Over time, such responses can deepen students' disengagement from the classroom and perpetuate cycles of academic underachievement and emotional distress (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2020).

The Emergence of Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices

In response to the widespread impact of trauma on students, the concept of trauma-informed teaching has gained considerable traction in recent years. This pedagogical approach is grounded in understanding how trauma affects learning and behavior and focuses on creating environments that promote psychological safety, trust, and student empowerment. Trauma-informed educators adapt their methods to reduce triggers, foster predictable routines, and build strong relationships with students (Thomas et al., 2023). The goal is not to diagnose trauma but to respond in ways that accommodate its impact and support student healing. Key principles of trauma-informed teaching include emotional safety, collaboration, empathy, and cultural responsiveness. Educators trained in this framework are encouraged to shift from punitive

discipline to restorative strategies, focusing on repairing harm and strengthening classroom community (Alisic et al., 2020). Such practices are seen as essential in reshaping classroom cultures to become more inclusive and responsive to students' individual needs.

Linking Trauma-Informed Practices with Student Engagement

Student engagement, encompassing emotional, behavioral, and cognitive participation in learning, is a crucial indicator of academic success. Research has found that students exposed to trauma are at a greater risk of becoming disengaged, often withdrawing from classroom interactions or losing interest in schoolwork (Hinnefeld, 2022). Trauma-informed practices help counteract these effects by building secure teacher-student relationships, offering flexible responses to student needs, and fostering a sense of belonging. Classrooms that implement trauma-responsive strategies often observe improved attendance, increased participation, and a more positive classroom climate. When students feel emotionally safe and valued, their willingness to take academic risks and interact meaningfully with learning materials increases significantly (Thomas et al., 2023). These findings suggest that engagement is not merely a function of academic rigor but also of emotional and relational safety.

Impact on Classroom Behavior

Behavioral issues such as defiance, aggression, or inattentiveness are commonly associated with students who have experienced trauma. Traditionally, these behaviors have been addressed through zero-tolerance policies or exclusionary discipline, which often exacerbate the problem (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2020). Trauma-informed teaching, in contrast, seeks to understand the root causes of behavior and respond with empathy and structure. Teachers who apply trauma-informed strategies often use de-escalation techniques, offer choices, and promote self-regulation skills. These approaches not only reduce the frequency of behavioral incidents but also help students develop a sense of control and emotional awareness. Studies have shown that classrooms practicing trauma sensitivity report fewer disciplinary referrals and improved peer relationships (Alisic et al., 2020; Subica et al., 2021).

Challenges and the Need for Professional Development

While trauma-informed education holds promise, its implementation is not without challenges. Teachers often report a lack of formal training, institutional support, or time to effectively adopt these practices (Thomas et al., 2023). Additionally, there may be resistance to shifting away from traditional discipline systems. To ensure successful adoption, schools must invest in sustained professional development, policy support, and leadership commitment to trauma-responsive approaches.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation for this study is rooted in **Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs** (1943), which remains a widely accepted framework in education and psychology, especially when addressing the holistic development of students. According to Maslow, human motivation is driven by the fulfillment of basic to complex needs, ranging from physiological survival to self-actualization. In the context of education, students who have experienced trauma often operate at the lower tiers of this hierarchy—particularly in the domains of **safety, belonging, and emotional stability**—which directly impacts their capacity to engage and behave appropriately in classroom environments.

Trauma disrupts students' sense of physical and emotional safety, making it difficult for them to access higher-level cognitive functions necessary for learning, such as attention, memory, and problem-solving (Thomas et al., 2023). When students feel unsafe or disconnected, their academic engagement diminishes and behavioral challenges tend to rise. **Trauma-informed teaching practices** seek to address these unmet needs by establishing safe, predictable, and supportive learning environments that rebuild trust and foster emotional regulation. By fulfilling the foundational needs of **safety**, **connection**, and **esteem**, trauma-informed classrooms can help move students up the motivational ladder, enabling them to engage more meaningfully with academic tasks and interact more positively with peers and teachers. In this way, Maslow's theory provides a valuable lens through which to understand how trauma-informed practices influence both **student engagement** and **classroom behavior**. Moreover, the theory emphasizes that learning cannot occur unless a student's basic needs are met—a central premise of trauma-informed pedagogy. Therefore, this study is theoretically anchored in Maslow's model, asserting that educational success is deeply tied to the psychological and emotional well-being of learners.

Conceptual Model

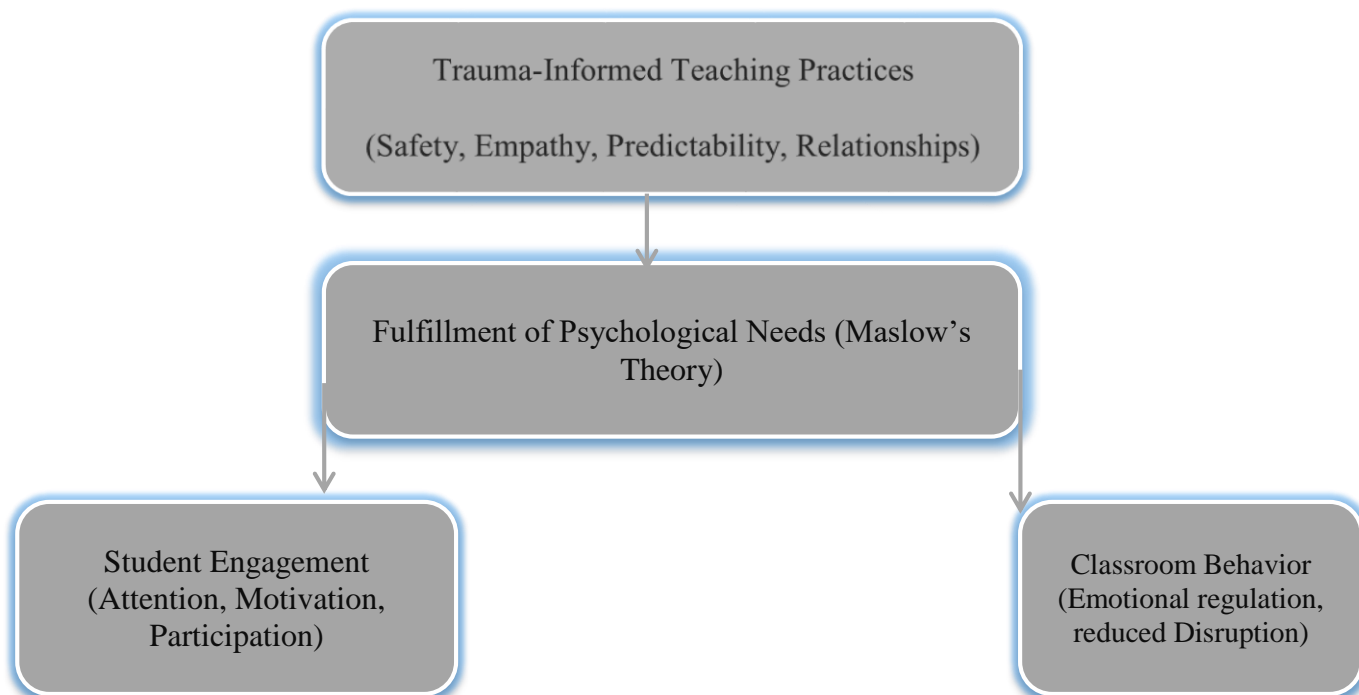


Figure 1: Conceptual Model

Conceptual model (figure 1) shows that trauma-informed teaching is not just about altering pedagogy; it addresses core human needs that directly affect students' readiness to learn and interact. When these needs are met, students are more likely to become emotionally and cognitively engaged, while behavioral disruptions decline due to increased feelings of security and support.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a pragmatic research philosophy, emphasizing real-world application and flexible methodologies to explore the influence of trauma-informed teaching practices on student engagement and classroom behavior. Pragmatism enables the integration of quantitative approaches to capture nuanced, contextually grounded insights into how teachers perceive and implement trauma-responsive strategies. A quantitative, cross-sectional survey design was employed, allowing for the examination of teachers' perceptions at a single point in time while ensuring consistency across diverse educational settings in the districts of Dera Ismail Khan and Tank. The target population consisted of approximately 3,300 secondary school teachers—2,500 from D.I. Khan and 800 from Tank. Utilizing Yamane's (1967) formula at a 95% confidence level and 5% margin of error, the final sample size was calculated to be 357 participants. A stratified random sampling method was employed to ensure proportional representation across gender, school types (boys' and girls'), and geographic locality (urban and rural). Data were collected using a structured questionnaire divided into three main sections: demographic information, trauma-informed teaching practices (based on Thomas et al., 2023), and student engagement and classroom behavior (adapted from Hinnefeld, 2022 and Alisic et al., 2020), each using a five-point Likert scale. Content validity was ensured through expert review by five professionals in education and psychology, while a pilot study involving 30 teachers tested the tool's clarity and usability. Reliability of the instrument was confirmed using Cronbach's Alpha, with coefficients indicating strong internal consistency: 0.84 for trauma-informed practices, 0.79 for student engagement, and 0.81 for classroom behavior—each exceeding the acceptable threshold of 0.70. Following approval from District Education Officers in both regions, questionnaires were distributed and collected personally by the researcher with assistance from designated school focal persons. Participants were assured of confidentiality and voluntary participation. Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 21, where descriptive statistics (frequencies, means and standard deviations) summarized the demographic and variable distributions. Inferential statistics were used to test relationships and differences: Pearson correlation measured associations between trauma-informed teaching and student outcomes, linear regression determined the predictive influence of trauma-responsive strategies, and independent samples t-tests and ANOVA compared group means based on teacher demographics such as gender, experience, and school locality. This comprehensive methodology supports a rigorous investigation into how trauma-informed practices shape the educational experiences of students across these two districts.

DATA ANALYSIS

Table 1

Descriptive Statistics for Major Variables (N = 357)

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Minimum	Maximum
Trauma-Informed Practices	4.12	0.51	2.67	5.00
Student Engagement	4.06	0.56	2.40	5.00
Classroom Behavior	3.97	0.59	2.10	5.00

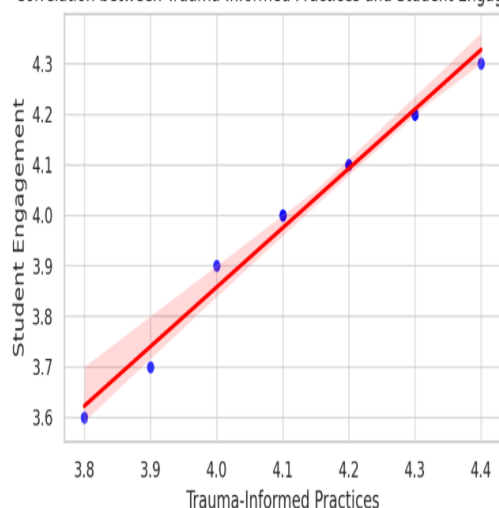
The descriptive statistics indicate that teachers perceive themselves to implement trauma-informed practices at a high level ($M = 4.12$, $SD = 0.51$), with student engagement also rated relatively high ($M = 4.06$, $SD = 0.56$). Classroom behavior showed a slightly lower but still positive mean score ($M = 3.97$, $SD = 0.59$). The standard deviations suggest moderate variability among respondents' perceptions, indicating a diverse range of experiences and observations.

Table 2**Pearson Correlation Matrix among Study Variables**

Variables	1	2	3
1. Trauma-Informed Practices —			
2. Student Engagement	.654 ($p < .01$)	—	
3. Classroom Behavior	.611 ($p < .01$)	.702 ($p < .01$)	—

The Pearson correlation analysis revealed statistically significant positive correlations among all three variables. Trauma-informed teaching practices demonstrated a strong positive correlation with student engagement ($r = .654$, $p < .01$), suggesting that as trauma-informed strategies increase, so does students' active participation and interest in learning. Similarly, trauma-informed practices were positively correlated with improved classroom behavior ($r = .611$, $p < .01$), indicating that supportive and empathetic teaching approaches are associated with fewer behavioral disruptions. The strongest correlation was found between student engagement and classroom behavior ($r = .702$, $p < .01$), reflecting that engaged students tend to exhibit more constructive behavior and fewer disciplinary issues. These findings align with previous literature and reinforce the theoretical assumption that when students feel safe, respected, and emotionally supported, their ability to engage academically and behave appropriately improves significantly.

Correlation between Trauma-Informed Practices and Student Engagement



Correlation between Trauma-Informed Practices and Classroom Behavior

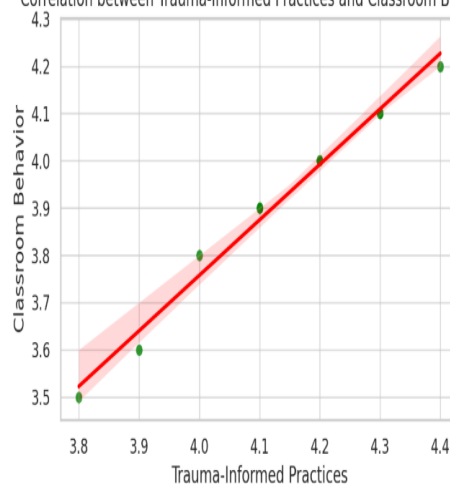


Table 3***Regression summary of Trauma-Informed Practices has influence on Students' engagement***

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t	p-value
Constant	0.4063	0.583	0.697	0.507
Trauma-Informed Practices	0.8874	0.140	6.356	.001

Dependent variable: Students' Engagement

The regression analysis assessing the influence of trauma-informed teaching practices on student engagement revealed a statistically significant and positive effect. The unstandardized regression coefficient ($B = 0.8874$, $p < .001$) indicates that for every one-unit increase in trauma-informed practices, student engagement increases by approximately 0.89 units. This suggests that teachers who consistently apply trauma-sensitive strategies—such as emotional support, relational consistency, and inclusive teaching—foster greater interest, motivation, and active participation among students. The low p-value ($< .001$) confirms the statistical significance of this relationship, demonstrating that the implementation of trauma-informed teaching is a strong predictor of heightened student engagement in classroom settings.

Table 4***Regression summary of Trauma-Informed Practices has influence on Students' Behavior***

Predictor	Coefficient (B)	Std. Error	t	p-value
Constant	0.5699	0.592	0.962	0.368
Trauma-Informed Practices	0.8265	0.142	5.831	.001

Dependent variable: Students' Behavior

In the second regression model, trauma-informed teaching practices also emerged as a significant predictor of positive classroom behavior. The coefficient ($B = 0.8265$, $p < .001$) indicates that an increase in trauma-informed teaching is associated with an improvement of approximately 0.83 units in students' behavioral adjustment. This finding reinforces the idea that when teachers use empathetic, structured, and supportive strategies, students are more likely to exhibit constructive behaviors such as attentiveness, cooperation, and emotional regulation. The statistically significant p-value ($< .001$) confirms the reliability of this finding, suggesting that trauma-informed approaches contribute meaningfully to reducing disruptive behavior and enhancing classroom climate.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm the strong and statistically significant influence of trauma-informed teaching practices on both student engagement and classroom behavior in public secondary schools in Dera Ismail Khan and Tank. The regression analyses revealed that trauma-informed strategies significantly predicted higher levels of student engagement and improved classroom behavior, indicating the practical efficacy of such approaches in real-world educational contexts. These findings align with contemporary research emphasizing the importance of trauma-informed pedagogy in enhancing educational outcomes. According to

Brunzell, Waters, and Stokes (2021), trauma-informed practices that promote emotional safety, student voice, and relational trust directly impact students' ability to concentrate, participate, and remain emotionally regulated during classroom activities. In environments where students have experienced adversity—including poverty, displacement, or violence—such practices become even more critical (Thomas et al., 2023). By using empathetic communication, consistent routines, and relational reinforcement, teachers create a psychologically safe space that fosters student engagement and minimizes disruptive behaviors. The positive relationship between trauma-informed teaching and student engagement observed in this study is further corroborated by research conducted by Hinnefeld (2022), who found that students in trauma-sensitive classrooms reported higher motivation and participation levels. Similarly, Alisic et al. (2020) emphasize that trauma-informed approaches can reduce internalized stress, allowing students to better focus and interact within academic settings. These findings suggest that when teachers recognize trauma-related cues and adjust their instructional strategies accordingly, students are more likely to feel understood, supported, and empowered to learn. Moreover, the statistically significant impact on classroom behavior supports the theory that trauma-informed classrooms reduce reactive discipline and increase pro-social behavior. As noted by Crosby et al. (2022), behavior improves when students feel emotionally secure, valued, and respected. Trauma-informed educators often emphasize co-regulation strategies and restorative practices that promote emotional literacy and accountability rather than punitive discipline, leading to fewer classroom disruptions and more cooperative learning environments. These results are also aligned with the broader literature advocating for whole-school implementation of trauma-informed frameworks. According to McIntyre et al. (2023), systemic adoption of trauma-informed practices across staff training, classroom management, and instructional planning can lead to measurable improvements in both academic performance and behavioral outcomes.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study provides compelling evidence that trauma-informed teaching practices have a significant and positive impact on both student engagement and classroom behavior in secondary schools. The regression results confirmed that as teachers adopt strategies rooted in emotional safety, empathy, and relational trust, students demonstrate increased participation and reduced behavioral disruptions. These findings underscore the critical role that trauma-responsive approaches play in fostering a supportive and productive learning environment, particularly in regions like Dera Ismail Khan and Tank, where many students face various forms of adversity. The results not only validate existing literature but also highlight the urgent need for systemic integration of trauma-informed principles in teaching and school culture. **It is strongly recommended that trauma-informed teaching be embedded into teacher professional development programs and pre-service training curricula.** Educational authorities and school leadership should institutionalize training workshops that equip teachers with the skills to recognize trauma symptoms, implement emotionally responsive strategies, and build supportive classroom communities. Doing so will enhance student learning experiences, reduce behavioral challenges, and contribute to long-term educational equity and well-being.

RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This study highlights the necessity of integrating trauma-informed teaching in school systems, especially in high-adversity regions. It provides empirical support for policy reforms that prioritize student emotional well-being alongside academic goals. Teacher training institutions should embed trauma-awareness modules into certification programs. Findings advocate for school-wide frameworks promoting safe, predictable, and supportive learning environments. Future research can explore longitudinal impacts and adapt the model across diverse educational contexts.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest associated with this research. This study was conducted purely for academic purposes, without any financial, professional, or personal interests that could have influenced the research process or outcomes. All ethical guidelines and institutional protocols were strictly followed.

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