

Chapter # 28

TRI-THEORY APPROACH FOR MITIGATING THE IMPACTS OF POLY-VIOLENCE EXPOSURE ON LEARNERS IN SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOLS

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ABSTRACT

The incessant episodes of learners' exposure to poly-violence and their attendant traumatic consequences in South African schools present a complex challenge that significantly impacts learners' well-being and academic outcomes. The lack of trauma-informed approaches in school safety management creates a cycle of disadvantage that can have long-lasting effects on learners and broader societal outcomes. This situation highlights a gap in the existing school safety framework. Hence, this study aims to propose a trauma-informed blueprint that empowers school leaders to mitigate the impact of poly-violence exposure trauma on learners' academic outcomes and general well-being. The study adopted a conceptual analysis research design to synthesise three theories and relevant literature. This study underscores the multifaceted negative impact of poly-violence exposure on learners' emotional, psychological, and academic well-being. The deficiencies in current school safety interventions are also highlighted. The study proposes an integrative trauma-informed school system (ITISS) to mitigate the impact of trauma associated with learners' exposure to poly-violence. Implementing the ITISS is anticipated to enhance learners' emotional and social competence and improve their well-being and learning outcomes. The study calls for a school safety policy reform that institutionalises trauma-responsive professional development and budgets for educational practitioners to be effective.

Keywords: learning outcomes, poly-violence, school leadership, trauma-informed school, human capital, trauma.

1. INTRODUCTION

Violence against children is a global public health concern because it affects the physical, mental, and social well-being of young people (Howell et al., 2023). The World Health Organization (WHO) (2022) defines violence against children as any form of physical, sexual, or emotional violence, including neglect of children. The organisation estimates that up to 1 billion children aged 2–17 years have experienced such violence or neglect in the past year. Child exposure to violence manifests as physical, sexual, and emotional abuse in homes, communities, and educational institutions. Studies indicate that children's exposure to violence increases the risk of adverse outcomes across multiple domains. Addressing the multifaceted traumatic consequences of poly-violence is imperative for enhancing learners' holistic well-being and academic achievement.

Given the associated implications of this menace, the United Nations (UN) prioritises the prevention and eradication of violence against children in its 2030 agenda in section 16.2. of its sustainable development goals (SDGs) (United Nations, 2015). Similarly, WHO also introduced a pro-child safety framework tagged INSPIRE: Prevention Strategies to End Violence Against Children (WHO, 2016). INSPIRE is an acronym for implementing and enforcing laws, norms, and values; safe environments; parent and caregiver support; income and economic strengthening; response and support services; and education and life skills. Unfortunately, the success rate of the framework varies by country (UNICEF, 2018). The variations characterising INSPIRE implementation in these countries are linked to inadequate funding, insufficient coordination, and a lack of comprehensive data collection and effective evaluation mechanisms.

The situation is no different in South Africa, where the high rate of violence against children is a major public health concern. Romero, Hall, and Cluver (2018) examined whether teacher support for learners who are victims of multiple forms of violence can mitigate school delays. The results indicated that while higher academic support from teachers was linked to reduced school delay, emotional support did not moderate the relationship between poly-violence exposure and school delay. Similarly, Romero et al. (2021) explored the effects of violence on the educational outcomes of adolescents living in socio-economically disadvantaged communities in South Africa. The findings revealed that approximately 93.8% of adolescents had experienced poly-violence within the past month. It was also found that more frequent exposure to poly-violence was associated with an increased risk of school delay.

Despite these advances in studies on the prevalence and impact of violence on children and adolescents, they predominantly focus on documenting the prevalence of violence rather than developing actionable blueprints for the school system. This study contributes to the existing body of knowledge and practice by proposing a novel tri-theoretical framework that synergises three theories. Unlike fragmented approaches, the proposed blueprint uniquely bridges individual trauma recovery, empathetic leadership practices, and strategic capacity-building to create healing-centered ecosystems in schools. The study offers a holistic blueprint that addresses poly-violence trauma at relational, institutional and systemic levels. It is anticipated that if well-actioned, the model could advance a culturally responsive model that disrupts cycles of intergenerational violence. In addition, the blueprint fills a gap in school safety frameworks by prioritising actionable, scalable strategies over descriptive analyses, thereby offering a transformative pathway for trauma-affected school systems globally.

Research Questions:

1. What is the impact of poly-violence trauma on learners' academic achievement in South African schools?
2. What gaps exist in South Africa's school violence prevention frameworks?
3. In what ways do the principles of ARCT, Trauma-Informed Leadership (TiL), and Human Capital Theory (HCT) interact to explain how trauma exposure impacts learners?
4. How can a theory-informed blueprint be developed to mitigate the negative effects of post-poly violence trauma on learners' well-being and outcomes?

2. METHODOLOGY

This study employed Leenaars's Thematic Conceptual Analysis (TCA), a qualitative framework rooted in psychological autopsy methods and psychodynamic theory (Leenaars, 1988, 2004), to synthesise insights from literature and theories. TCA was selected for its capacity to identify and interpret latent psychological themes in trauma-affected learners' experiences while integrating multidisciplinary theories (e.g., attachment, cognitive, and psychosocial frameworks). TCA's emphasis on psychological validity and multidisciplinary triangulation (Leenaars, 2004) guided the synthesis of themes, ensuring alignment with South Africa's socio-educational context. Unlike traditional content analysis, TCA prioritises depth over breadth, emphasising recurring psychological constructs such as unbearable psychological pain, interpersonal trauma, turmoil, and cognitive distortions (Leenaars, 2004).

While the literature selection process does not follow systematic review protocols like PRISMA, its strength lies in synthesising interdisciplinary insights to address the study's unique tri-theoretical focus. Our searches spanned 2000–2024 to prioritise contemporary trauma-informed interventions but included foundational works (e.g., Becker's, 1964, HCT). (It should be noted that this work is drawn from a larger work) We queried Web of Science, Scopus and ERIC databases using Boolean operators and terms like as "poly-violence trauma," "trauma-informed leadership in schools," "attachment theory and education," "human capital," "trauma management," "child exposure to violence and academic performance," and "student achievement". After screening, relevant articles that met the inclusion criteria and peer-reviewed studies in English explicitly linking trauma to learning outcomes, psychological well-being, or systemic interventions were included. We excluded studies focusing solely on violence prevalence without educational implications and those not written in English.

Leenaars's Thematic Conceptual Analysis (TCA) was employed to synthesise our findings into themes that align with the study's focus on trauma's impact on learners' attachment, self-regulation, and competency (ARCT). The process involved iterative phases: (1) repeated readings of literature to identify patterns (e.g., trauma's role in academic disengagement), (2) grouping findings into conceptual categories (e.g., institutional safety gaps), and (3) interpreting themes through the tri-theoretical lens of ARCT, TiLT, and HCT. This approach ensured analytical rigor while accommodating the complexities of poly-violence trauma in South African schools.

3. FINDINGS

Consistent with the research question, this section presents the findings of this study.

3.1. Theme One: An Overview of the Prevalence and Impact of Poly-Violence Against Children in South Africa

This theme responds to research question one: What is the impact of poly-violence trauma on learners' academic achievement in South African schools? Empirical studies underscore the alarming prevalence and multifaceted nature of this issue, emphasising its intersection with socioeconomic, familial, and systemic factors.

3.1.1. Epidemiological Patterns of Violence

Nationwide surveys have revealed disturbing trends in violence against children (VAC). Meinck et al. (2016), in a study of 3,515 adolescents across two provinces, found that 56.3% reported lifetime physical abuse, 35.54% emotional abuse, and 9% sexual abuse. Poly-victimisation is prevalent, with 35.4% of children experiencing at least five forms of victimisation before the age of 17 (Leoschut & Kafaar, 2017).

3.1.2. Structural and Contextual Drivers

The aetiology of VAC is rooted in interconnected systemic factors. Community and political violence are significant predictors of adverse psychological outcomes, with poly-victimisation strongly correlating with anxiety, depression, and perceived stress (Sui et al., 2018). The COVID-19 lockdown exacerbated risks, intensifying domestic violence through heightened family conflict in affluent households and food insecurity in low-income settings. All of these culminate in the intergenerational transmission of violence, which perpetuates cycles of abuse; children exposed to parental violence are more likely to perpetrate dating violence in adulthood.

3.1.3. Psychosocial and Health Consequences on Learners' Well-Being

VAC's repercussions extend far beyond immediate harm. Victims of multiple violent exposures exhibit a 3.5-fold higher risk of depression and elevated suicidal ideation (Meinck et al., 2016). Poly-victimisation compounds vulnerabilities, increasing the risks of school dropout, unemployment, and HIV exposure (Leoschut & Kafaar, 2017). Early childhood exposure to violence disrupts neurodevelopmental trajectories, impairing emotional regulation and cognitive function. These outcomes underscore the detrimental nature of VAC, where overlapping epidemics of violence, mental health disorders, and socioeconomic inequities mutually reinforce harm to children.

3.1.4. Consequences of Poly-Violence Trauma on Learning Outcomes

Studies have shown that exposure to multiple forms of violence negatively impacts students' learning outcomes in South Africa. Studies have indicated that exposure is associated with poor mental health, behavioural problems, and reduced academic performance among students. A study of Cape Town adolescents found that exposure to violence was strongly associated with high levels of depressive, anxiety, and PTSD symptoms, as well as an increased risk of self-harm, even after adjusting for social support (Stansfeld et al., 2017). Another study found that experiencing physical fighting, weapon-related threats, and bullying at school were all associated with higher levels of safety concerns and depression, which in turn led to lower academic performance. However, the study reported that these effects were significantly greater for female students than for males (Kim et al., 2020).

3.2. Theme Two: Deficiencies of School Safety Framework and Interventions in South Africa

This theme examines the deficiencies in South African school safety interventions in response to the second research question: What gaps exist in South Africa's school violence prevention frameworks? It focuses on the National School Safety Framework (NSSF) and the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) program. The NSSF, introduced in 2015, aims to address school violence through human rights and collaboration with stakeholders. However, its implementation has been inconsistent owing to varying school capacities, stakeholder commitments, and contextual factors. Systemic weaknesses include

inadequate resources, insufficient monitoring, and limited implementation (Kutywayo et al., 2024). The framework's uniform approach fails to address evolving challenges, such as cyberbullying, and some students still feel unsafe during school commutes. Another intervention is the CSTL program, initiated in 2008, which aims to support vulnerable learners holistically. While it positively impacted some schools, its effectiveness is limited by insufficient funding, high staff turnover, coordination challenges, and uneven implementation (Department of Basic Education, 2017). Recent evaluations reveal that over 50% of schools lack adequate CSTL training for educators, many school-based support teams are inactive or poorly resourced, and only 12% of schools hosted mental health awareness events in the past year. Despite its holistic intent, CSTL's efficacy is undermined by fragile support structures, limited psychological services, and training gaps, necessitating urgent policy and systemic reforms.

3.3. Theme Three: Understanding and Mitigating Trauma's Impact on Learners: A Tri-theoretical Perspective

This theme addresses research question three: In what ways do the principles of ARCT, trauma-informed leadership, and human capital theory interact to explain how trauma exposure affects learners? These theories were synthesised to elucidate how trauma exposure impedes learners' well-being and academic performance.

3.3.1. ARCT's Tripartite Framework for Trauma Recovery

ARCT posits that trauma disrupts attachment, self-regulation, and competency, which are interdependent domains critical to resilience (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019). Attachment underscores relational security as foundational to emotional stability. Trauma fractures trust, destabilising learners' sense of safety. However, educators trained in trauma-informed practices can rebuild secure attachments through consistency and empathy, fostering emotional regulation and engagement. Self-regulation addresses trauma-induced neurodevelopmental impairments, particularly in emotional modulation and impulse control. Structured routines and mindfulness practices help recalibrate stress responses and restore cognitive focus. Competency focuses on skill-building to counteract the erosion of agency caused by trauma. Collectively, ARCT provides actionable pathways for transforming classrooms into environments that foster resilience.

3.3.2. Trauma-Informed Leadership Theory (TiLT) as an Organizational Paradigm

TiLT, informed by Felitti and Anda's (2010) ACE study, shifts institutional focus from pathologizing behaviour ("What's wrong?") to contextualising trauma ("What happened?"). Its tenets—safety, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness—reorient school climates toward healing. Safety prioritises predictable routines and transparent communication to mitigate hypervigilance. Collaborative empowerment engages stakeholders in co-designing interventions and redistributing the power eroded by trauma. For example, training teachers on trauma's neurobiological impacts reduces re-traumatisation risks, while student involvement fosters inclusive policies. *Cultural responsiveness* acknowledges the intersecting traumas linked to marginalisation, necessitating culturally attuned support. TiLT reframes behavioural challenges as survival strategies, replacing punitive discipline with empathetic enquiry. A student's outburst, reinterpreted as unmet safety needs, illustrates how TiLT-driven leadership fosters trust and academic risk-taking (Papa & Robinson, 2023). TiLT thus positions schools as ecosystems of healing, where trauma-aware practices unlock the potential of students and staff.

3.3.3. Human Capital Theory (HCT) for Capacity Building

Human Capital Theory (HCT) posits that staff training is a crucial investment for enhancing an organisation's capacity (Becker, 1964). This translates to developing educators' trauma-informed competencies in the educational context, which can significantly improve learners' well-being and academic outcomes (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016). HCT emphasises the importance of context-specific training, suggesting that targeted approaches yield substantial returns in terms of productivity and innovation. For instance, when teachers are equipped to identify trauma symptoms, they can foster an empathetic environment that empowers students to regain their agency. This underscores the critical role of school leaders as human capital architects who must prioritise professional development tailored to address the complexities of trauma. Such focused training ensures that staff are well prepared to address the unique needs of learners affected by traumatic experiences.

3.4. Theme Four: Integrative Trauma-Informed School System (ITISS)

The study proposes ITISS as a blueprint to answer research question four: How can a theory-informed blueprint be developed to mitigate the adverse effects of poly-violence trauma on learners' well-being and outcomes? Grounded in ARCT, TiLT, and HCT principles, ITISS reimagines schools as healing ecosystems that prioritise empathy, equity, and evidence-based practices. Specifically, ITISS addresses the systemic impact of trauma on learners by synthesising three theoretical pillars: attachment, self-regulatory, and competency theory (ARCT), trauma-informed leadership theory (TiLT), and human capital theory (HCT).

The Rationale for Theories Synthesis

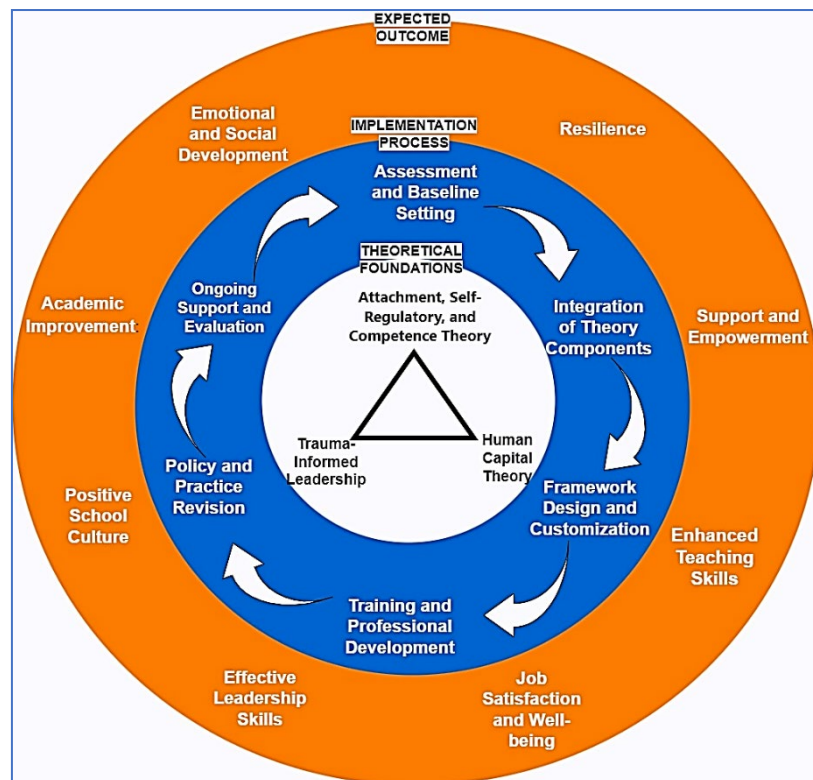
We considered the synthesis and implementation of the three theories mentioned earlier as more effective than when each is implemented in a silo, based on the following reasons. ARCT, as a standalone theory, primarily focuses on individual therapeutic processes and classroom-level interactions, with limited attention to system-wide leadership and policy constraints. TiLT, in turn, as a singular framework, though, offers a robust organisational lens for understanding the impact of trauma on leadership; it does not fully specify how leaders can operationalise trauma-responsive practice in resource-constrained schools without a deliberate focus on staff development and capacity building. Finally, HCT emphasises investments in human capital but is relatively silent on the specific relational and organisational conditions needed to ensure that such investments translate into trauma-responsive practice in schools. In light of the deficiencies of these theories, we propose an integrative trauma-informed school system (ITISS) as a comprehensive and more explicit approach. The model was proposed as a blueprint designed to address the relational, organisational, and capacity-building blind spots that emerge when the three approaches are applied separately.

ARCT provides a foundation for rebuilding secure attachments, emotional regulation, and competency in trauma-affected learners. For instance, consistent teacher-student relationships restore trust, enabling withdrawn students to re-engage academically. The application of TiLT principles will reorient school leadership from punitive to empathetic practices, replacing “What is wrong with you?” with “What happened to you?” to foster healing climates (Papa & Robinson, 2023). The blueprint holds that effective implementation of HCT principles through strategic investments in staff training will ensure that educators recognise trauma's neurobiological impacts and adopt responsive pedagogies (Brunzell et al., 2016). Together, these theories position schools as resilient ecosystems.

3.4.1. Implementation Process

We propose that the ITISS implementation process, as shown in Figure 1. The implementation process comprises (1) assessment and baseline setting; (2) trauma-informed capacity-building and professional development; (3) policy and practice realignment; and (4) continuous monitoring and refinement (Chafouleas et al., 2016; Whitford et al., 2018). At each stage of implementation, the principles of the theories operationalised and interact; for example, assessment includes mapping poly-violence exposure, learner outcomes, and existing supports to determine institutional readiness, consistent with recommendations for trauma-informed school system implementation (Overstreet & Chafouleas, 2016). In the capacity-building phase, ARCT structures educator training around attachment, self-regulation, and competency; TiLT guides leaders in creating safe, collaborative climates; and HCT underpins systematic investment in trauma-specific professional development and support for staff (Blaustein & Kinniburgh, 2019; Brunzell et al., 2016; Papa & Robinson, 2023). Next, efforts should be made to institutionalise policy and practice revision to replace punitive measures with restorative approaches. Finally, there is a need for ongoing support and evaluation to ensure sustained integration of theory components. By synthesising these theories, the ITISS represents a comprehensive blueprint that addresses trauma at the individual, institutional, and systemic levels. This approach will enable schools to create resilient ecosystems that support learners affected by trauma, ultimately improving their well-being and learning outcomes.

Figure 1.
Integrative Trauma-Informed School System (ITISS).



Source: Developed by the authors (2025)

We believe that the effective implementation of ARCT will contribute to ITISS by focusing on individual recovery. ARCT principles offer strategies for teachers to rebuild secure attachments, enhance the emotional regulation of affected learners, and foster competencies in trauma-affected learners. They address the interpersonal aspects of trauma recovery, helping students regain trust and re-engage academically through consistent teacher-student relationships. The TiLT principle should be leveraged to reconfigure the institutional climate by reorienting school leadership from punitive to empathetic practices. It helps them shift the focus on managing learners who are trauma victims from "What is wrong with you?" to "What happened to you?" (Papa & Robinson, 2023). This approach fosters a healing environment and supportive atmosphere for trauma-affected learners. To sustain the impact of previous theories, an effective application of HCT principles will engender strategic investments in staff capacities toward school-based trauma-informed practices. This will equip them to recognise trauma's neurobiological impacts and adopt responsive pedagogies (Brunzell et al., 2016) that support trauma-affected learners effectively.

3.4.2. Anticipated Outcomes

The ITISS is anticipated to yield multifaceted benefits if effectively implemented. Key outcomes may include improved student well-being and resilience, enhanced trauma-informed teaching pedagogy, increased job satisfaction and well-being among teachers, increased academic engagement, reduced disciplinary issues through restorative practices, and enhanced school culture and climate, as well as the emotional and social development of affected learners. The framework is expected to boost educators' competency in trauma-responsive pedagogies that disrupt intergenerational trauma cycles (Brunzell et al., 2016). Systemic changes may involve policy reforms and trauma-informed training at the institutional level. The ITISS aims to ensure improved outcomes for all students, particularly those affected by trauma, and to improve accessibility to mental health resources. However, empirical validation of these anticipated outcomes across diverse contexts, especially regarding the long-term impacts on academic performance and mental health, is necessary for future research.

Notably, while empirical validation is germane to authenticate the operationalisation of ITISS, the key strengths of the framework are foregrounded in the synthesis of the empirical evidence of the prevalence of poly-violence against children in South Africa; the tri-theoretical conceptualisation at various levels (including individuals, relational, organisational and systemic) and finally, the proposed framework builds on the existing school safety framework in the country.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

Effective ITISS adoption requires coordinated policy action. Governments should institutionalise trauma-informed training in teacher certification programmes and allocate budgets for interdisciplinary coalitions (e.g., educators, social workers, and NGOs) (Leoschut & Kafaar, 2017). Labour reforms, such as workload limits and trauma certification stipends, should be considered to protect educators from burnout (Motta, 2020). School partnerships with local clinics and anti-violence organisations will enhance resource accessibility, particularly for survivors of gender-based violence.

5. CONCLUSION

The study explored the impact of trauma on the well-being and learning outcomes of learners who were previously exposed to poly-violence in South Africa. The findings revealed: the existence of pervasive and multifaceted effects of poly-violence on learners' mental health and learning outcomes; limitations of the current school safety measures, the complementary, yet incomplete nature of ARCT, TiLT and HCT when deployed separately. The ITISS proposed a holistic blueprint for how schools can mitigate the impact of trauma on learners. The framework has the potential to integrate relational healing, empathetic leadership, and strategic staff development. It also serves as a precursor for an inclusive school environment where traumatised learners are empowered to regain emotional competence, resulting in enhanced well-being and improved learning outcomes. This study is not insulated from limitations, like every other study. The limitation of this study lies in its conceptual nature and reliance on secondary data. Hence, we propose that future research empirically validate the ITISS's efficacy across diverse contexts, particularly its long-term impact on academic performance and mental health. Longitudinal studies tracking poly-victimised learners could refine trauma-responsive strategies, ensuring equitable outcomes for all students.

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