



Book Review

Trauma-Informed Practice in Montessori Classrooms: An Essential Guide for Students and Teachers

By Bernadette Phillips, Catriona O'Toole, Sinéad McGilloway, and Stephen Phillips
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Over the course of the past three decades, practitioners across several fields have centered conversations about the impact of trauma in their work. Trauma-informed practice (TIP), a term Harris and Fallot (2001) coined, was developed to design systems, structures, and environments that honor the whole person and prioritize their autonomy and strengths in the service of healing. In educational environments, this requires uplifting conversations that examine the school's potential to operate as a sanctuary for restoration or, should institutional practices remain unscrutinized, as an inadvertent source of further harm for children

and families. Recognizing Montessori education's potential contributions to the field of trauma-informed practice, authors Phillips, O'Toole, McGilloway, and Phillips penned *Trauma-Informed Practice in Montessori Classrooms: An Essential Guide for Students and Teachers*.

The book's coauthors bring together a broad range of knowledge and practical experience. Phillips is a Montessori-credentialed practitioner and teacher trainer based at Maynooth University (MU). O'Toole is a chartered psychologist and associate professor at MU, specializing in TIP in educational contexts. McGilloway is a professor of family and community mental

health at MU. Phillips is an independent researcher with a background as a Montessori practitioner and administrator.

Drawing on their varied experiences, the authors present a book that aims to provide information on the nature of trauma and its impacts on developing children, explore Maria Montessori's work with trauma-affected youth, and offer a framework for implementing TIP in Montessori learning environments. Phillips et al. argue that Montessori was a visionary educator who recognized the need for trauma-informed practice long before the field was formalized.

The book is divided into four parts. Part 1 outlines the history and primary tenets of Montessori education, drawing from historical accounts to demonstrate Montessori's early recognition of the necessity for trauma-informed practice. Part 2 focuses on trauma, defining it, discussing different forms of trauma, and explaining trauma's various impacts on developing children. Part 3 introduces TIP in educational settings, and Part 4 examines how contemporary Montessori schools can and do apply trauma-informed principles to their practice.

Trauma-Informed Practice in Montessori Classrooms: An Essential Guide for Students and Teachers is an academically rigorous, research-focused text. The book synthesizes major studies and theories from bodies of literature related to both trauma-informed and Montessori practice. It orients the reader to each field while drawing connections between them. The text balances academic rigor with accessibility and practical application, each chapter starting by outlining objectives and learning outcomes, and closing with a summary of key ideas and prompts to guide group discussion. Each chapter also offers several vignettes that apply key concepts to real-life scenarios. It fills an important gap as a text that equips teachers with knowledge they are unlikely to encounter in other areas of training programs.

Montessori's Healing Approach

In Chapter 1, the authors expound on Maria Montessori's specific training and qualification as an early practitioner of what is now defined as trauma-informed practice. Phillips et al. outline Montessori's early work as an assistant doctor at the University of Rome Psychiatric Clinic, where she studied children's mental health. The authors describe three groups of trauma-affected children Montessori worked with as she developed her method: the children of San Lorenzo, the child survivors of the

Messina earthquake, and French and Belgian children who were traumatized or orphaned during World War I. The authors assert that these experiences inspired Montessori to establish the White Cross humanitarian initiative, which sought to support children's emotional health in the wake of traumatic events. This dedication to ensuring children's psychological well-being is a defining feature of Montessori's pedagogical approach.

In Chapter 2, Phillips et al. depict the centrality of love, care, and compassion in Montessori's approach to guiding children. The authors describe Montessori as using what practitioners would now define as a "trauma-informed lens" (p. 26). In teacher training, Montessori emphasized the importance of understanding children's histories and family backgrounds. She encouraged teachers to consider trauma the child may have experienced and how this may affect their behavior and development. The authors also note specific pedagogical approaches in the Montessori Method, which current research on TIP supports. For instance, they describe how Montessori's rejection of rewards and punishments aligns with studies suggesting external motivators may replicate the transactional dynamics of manipulative caregivers.

Additionally, the authors explore the importance of self-correcting materials in the environment to support feelings of safety, autonomy, and resilience. Self-correcting materials eliminate the need to approach adults for assistance, which, for a child who perhaps experienced violence from adult figures, can decrease fear and contribute to feelings of self-efficacy. Phillips et al. argue that these, and several other components of the Montessori Method, offer pathways for TIP.

Understanding Trauma

Chapter 3 explores foundational concepts related to understanding trauma and its impacts on young children. Phillips et al. introduce various forms of trauma and stress, and the body's response to these experiences. The chapter introduces the science behind the body's stress system and trauma response, and then offers very concrete examples of how these responses may manifest for children and adolescents. It importantly outlines often overlooked signs and symptoms of exposure to traumatic stress in children in the 0–3 age range. The authors close the chapter by introducing the PACE model (Hughes & Golding, 2012). The PACE (Playfulness, Acceptance, Curiosity, and Empathy)

model offers practitioners trauma-informed mindsets and practices that can create feelings of safety for children who have experienced trauma.

In Chapter 4, the authors examine the effects of trauma on children's emotional, social, and cognitive functioning. The chapter draws on well-established literature, and the authors use well-placed vignettes set in Montessori learning environments to demonstrate these concepts in very recognizable classroom moments. One vignette of a student who witnesses violence and returns to school hypervigilant, unable to concentrate, and physically withdrawn, illustrates the way a single traumatic event can transform a child's relationship to the Prepared Environment. The section describing how trauma-impaired social functioning may cause students to misread a teacher's neutral expression as anger or interpret another student's playful shout as a threat is particularly relevant. Impaired concentration, language delays, and memory disruption can make the activities central to Montessori practice difficult for students to access. Naming these challenges sets up later chapters on how Montessori education can help rebuild what trauma has undermined.

Understanding Trauma-Informed Practice

Chapter 5 provides a thorough overview of the Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) Study, including its origins, methodology, and key findings (Felitti et al., 1998). Notably, the authors do not present this framework uncritically. They engage with many distinct limitations, including the study's failure to account for resilience factors, its exclusion of structural adversities such as racism and poverty, and the misuse of ACE scores as individual diagnostics. The chapter moves on to social determinants of health by citing Bernard et al. (2021) on the adverse impact of systemic racism and oppression and the need for reconceptualization of the ACE model. Venet's (2021) work outlining the necessity for accounting for exclusion based on race, ethnicity, gender, and disability when discussing connectedness and belonging indicates the equity dimensions the book carries forward into later chapters. Engagement in this section allows teachers to potentially avoid falling into the trap of viewing students through a deficit lens.

Chapter 6 introduces the foundational frameworks of trauma-informed practices, by tracing concepts articulated in Harris and Fallot's 2001 work through Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) (2014) descriptors.

SAMHSA's four core assumptions and six key principles create the framework for TIP across multiple settings. The four assumptions—that a trauma-informed system *realizes* the widespread impact of trauma, *recognizes* its signs and symptoms, *responds* by integrating this knowledge into policies and practices, and actively *resists* re-traumatization—are supported by the six key principles: (1) safety, (2) trustworthiness and transparency, (3) peer support, (4) collaboration and mutuality, (5) empowerment, and (6) responsiveness to cultural, historical, and gender issues.

The powerful vignette shared in this chapter highlights the story of a woman who spends decades seeking psychiatric help, only to have surface symptoms addressed without consideration for underlying issues caused by her years of abuse and neglect. Like the experiences of so many people, her story is a sobering reminder that systems designed to help can be harmful when the driving question is, "What is wrong with you?" rather than the trauma-informed reframe that asks, "What happened to you?" This seemingly simple mindset switch can be a matter of profound consequence to the people meant to be served by the institutions and systems currently in place and those developed in the future.

Chapter 7 moves from the general TIP framework into its educational application and is organized around an essential set of elements: the shift from a deficit lens to a trauma-informed perspective; the nature of relationships as healing; a strengths-based orientation; the promotion of safety, collaboration, and empowerment; the necessity of a whole school approach; and the importance of self-care. This work reflects concepts from Venet (2021), Alexander (2019), and Craig (2016), and the chapter is distinguished by the way these principles are woven into impactful vignettes set in Montessori environments.

Among these vignettes is the story of a child who finds belonging and joy in his Montessori school after having experienced explicit systemic racism in his previous school, and the authors discuss racial trauma as a call for systemic change. The relational school culture is illustrated by the teachers' quiet, unsentimental efforts to remove barriers for all families—for example, by arranging transportation without fanfare or learning the names of children's pets—highlighting sustained and perhaps unglamorous but transformational work of TIP carried out by teachers every day. Equally notable is the vignette of a young student who has developed survival skills by providing childcare for her infant brother as her parent battles debilitating depression, and has misapplied

these skills in the classroom setting. The teacher's decision to help channel the student's leadership insight into classroom systems rather than suppress them exemplifies a strengths-based approach at its best.

The chapter also addresses educator wellness, acknowledging that a dysregulated adult cannot adequately support a dysregulated child. The authors cite Venet's (2021) call for teacher wellness to be treated as a school-wide priority rather than left to individual coping strategies. A section is included on professional supervision for educators who work with trauma-affected children—a practice common in clinical settings but rare in schools. The self-care suggestions are practical, yet tend toward the individual rather than the structural, emphasizing a tension the field as a whole has yet to fully resolve.

Montessori Application

The mapping of SAMHSA's six TIP principles into Montessori practices makes Chapter 8 an effective and important part of this work. The treatment of safety is compelling, as the authors reframe common Montessori classroom routines and practices as neurobiological and psychological safety cues, and connect the teacher's "spiritual preparation" into the embodiment of felt safety as is recognized by the science behind the trauma-informed framework (p. 124). The vignette in this chapter shows the teacher supporting a newly arriving, deeply withdrawn student by offering a quiet, unforced, consistent gesture of welcome until the child is ready to respond, honestly depicting trauma-informed practice as a relational art. The chapter also cites the work of Wafford and Debs (2023) in an engagement with diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and anti-bias/anti-racist (ABAR) frameworks, and structural racism within Montessori education. This is a welcome inclusion that future work can weave throughout the TIP framework as the Montessori community continues to consider the decolonial nature of the work.

Complementing the preceding chapter, Chapter 9 maps the four assumptions from SAMHSA onto Montessori settings. The most practical of these is the "recognize" section, which organizes trauma indicators by developmental plane. This Montessori context offers teachers a familiar framework with which to view observations. A particularly sharp insight is that a child deeply absorbed in academic work but showing no

joy may not be experiencing the typical concentration celebrated in Montessori education and instead using the work as a dissociative coping strategy. This distinction has significant implications for Montessori educators who observe deep engagement and seek to understand the child's inner world.

In the "resist" section, the authors explicitly identify racism and discrimination as sources of trauma and re-traumatization, and call for culturally responsive and anti-bias training for practicing and incoming teachers. Educators may look to the cited works of Wafford and Debs (2023) to more fully understand the myth of inherent anti-racism in Montessori education and learn how institutions can develop ABAR practices more collective in scope.

Chapter 10 examines how contemporary Montessori environments can actively and implicitly support trauma-affected children. The authors present the integral idea that sequential memory development disrupted by trauma could potentially be rebuilt by Montessori education's emphasis on order, routine, and sequential materials, and that students' sequential memory processing is supported through engagement with muscle memory building practical life and sensorial work. The chapter positions arts and cultural activities, such as music, drawing, and clay sculpting, as potentially therapeutic practices and provides many examples for teachers to consider. The authors also link the concept of normalization to Csikszentmihalyi's (1990) flow theory, opening a compelling direction for future research to explore the way deep, self-chosen, meaningful work may produce neurological integration that counters trauma's fragmenting effects.

Conclusion

Phillips et al. aim to weave together theoretical knowledge with actionable strategy. The text is designed to support Montessori practitioners in strengthening their ability to create healing, trauma-informed environments for children and families. If the book leaves readers with one enduring idea, it is that the healing architecture of Montessori education has always been present, woven into the philosophy from its inception, and that contemporary educators are now uniquely positioned to name, study, and strengthen it. For the teachers, administrators, and teacher educators doing this work daily, this book offers both vocabulary and validation.

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