

Bridging emotional and academic gaps: The role of trauma-informed pedagogy in the integration of immigrant and minority students with special education needs

Kundai Mlambo ^{1,*} and Manetswa Florence Masuka ²

¹ Alice Vail Middle School.

² Lee School District.

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Abstract

Trauma-informed pedagogy is one of the effective strategies for meeting the academic as well as emotional inequities met by immigrant and minority students with special education needs. These learners frequently experience multifold problems embedded in both the pre-migration and post-migration traumas, disability-related stigma, cultural and linguistic barriers, and systemic exclusion. Trauma-informed education establishes healing, engagement, and a sense of belonging by emphasizing safety, trust, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness. The literature review examines various evidence-based practices such as culturally responsive instruction, bilingual and trauma-informed language instruction, social-emotional learning frameworks such as the Pyramid Model, and inclusive resources such as Universal Design for Learning and arts-based practices. It also shows the importance of community and family involvement and the field of new technologies such as virtual reality or the use of digital supports to increase accessibility. These drivers of successful implementation include educator preparation, leadership at the institution, and policy congruence. The UK and Nordic countries present global insights on the matter, or rather comparative insights whose relevance lies in the significance of integrated systems. This study recommends that intersectional reform of policy should be done to acknowledge the compounding effects of trauma, disability, and migration. The construction of inclusive educational systems should be made on a comprehensive equity basis that collaborates with the rights of all learners and their right to learning, succeeding, and flourishing on academic and non-academic fronts.

Keywords: Academic; Education; Emotional; Gaps; Immigrant; Trauma

1. Introduction

The rapidly increasing number of immigrants and refugees in classrooms across the globe has changed the educational environment fundamentally and calls upon teachers to refocus their efforts on learning institutions as the means of helping diverse learners (Boukhari, 2025; Davila et al., 2020). Most of these students have experiences of trauma due to displacement, war, or any persecution that directly affects their capacity to participate in learning and establish secure attachment in school settings (Morrison, 2022). Simultaneously, the studies show that minority students, especially those with an immigrant background, are overrepresented in special education, commonly caused by linguistic preferences, cultural misperceptions, or implicit biases during the referral and diagnostic processes (Hanssen, Harju-Luukkainen, and Sundqvist, 2023; Shah, 2024). This duality of identity creates a complex reality within the student body that is forced to deal with a myriad of situations beyond academic challenges to include emotional trauma, social marginalization, and structural disparity.

Although there has been an awareness growth, the majority of school systems continue being poorly prepared to address the overlapping needs of the trauma-impacted immigrant and students with special needs. Educators often

* Corresponding author: Kundai Mlambo ORCID: 0009-0008-7438-4955

have little or no preparation on how to identify the signs and symptoms of trauma or implement inclusive and culturally responsive practices in the classroom (Majebi, Adelodun, and Anyanwu, 2024) and (Mlambo K and Masuka MF, 2025). Furthermore, both neurological and cultural diversity do not always fit into the traditional pedagogical models, leaving the affected students under the danger of disengagement or failure. Consequently, such learners often encounter serious deficiencies in their academic levels and impoverished access to prominent support networks.

Trauma-informed pedagogy offers a promising response to these challenges. Based on concepts of emotional safety, empowerment, collaboration, and cultural responsiveness, this method aims to change classroom settings and delivery in order to more effectively meet the needs of vulnerable students (Anderson, Landy and Sanchez, 2023). The current paper will discuss how tragedy-informed pedagogy can fill the emotional and academic gap to facilitate the assimilation of immigration and minority students with special education needs.

2. Understanding trauma-informed pedagogy

Trauma-informed pedagogy is an educational model that understands that trauma is a prevalent issue in learning, behavior, and interaction and attempts to build learning environments that promote resiliency and academic achievement. Based on the concepts of emotional and physical safety, trustworthiness, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural responsiveness, the approach prepares educators to recover any adversity experienced by students in an empathetic and deliberate way (Arbour, Walker and Houston, 2023). In contrast to traditional pedagogy, trauma-informed instruction focuses both on what learners know and how they feel about the learning process, placing an essential focus on the classroom relationship and emotional atmosphere environment as a key driver of student performance.

In the case of immigrant and minority students with special education needs, trauma exists between several stressors that may occur at a systemic or individual level. A lot of migrant students experience pre-migration trauma like war, persecution, or poverty, and post-migration issues like acculturation stress, family separation, and social marginalization (Davila et al., 2020). Students with disabilities are disadvantaged further by the stigma, exclusion, or unavailability of services in the home country and the host countries (Shah, 2024). Additionally, implicit biases and structural racism in schools may result in mistaking some trauma-related behavior as defiant or academically incompetent due to inaccurate diagnosis, which results in unnecessary referral to special education courses or disciplinary action. These experiences not only impair academic performance but also lessen the confidence of students towards educational institutions.

The concept of trauma-informed pedagogy opens the doors to inclusive education by addressing these long-standing forms of inequities. With a trauma-responsive lens, schools do not question or get disturbed by the question of what is wrong with this student but rather look at the layer of what happened to this student and what we can do to support them. Such reframing promotes more equitable, culturally sensitive, and developmentally appropriate practices. This is because by giving space to student voice, agency, and connection, trauma-informed teaching creates a classroom environment in which all students, and those students who are vulnerable due to trauma and marginalization in particular, are able to succeed. Researchers claim that these strategies do not merely help to improve but play an instrumental role in making educational systems really inclusive (Liasidou, 2022; Gherardi, 2022). In the end, trauma-informed principles are treated as the theoretical background and rationale for meeting both the academic and emotional needs of diverse learners within an educational environment that is becoming more globalized and complicated.

The focus on relational teaching is also an important aspect of trauma-informed pedagogy, where a close, supportive relationship between the teachers and the learners is considered one of the sources of learning. The findings of the research indicate that emotionally safe and attached students have better cognitive performance, emotion control, and classroom participation (Dickson, 2021). In the case of the student who is affected by trauma, a sense of relationship security can serve as an effective protective barrier against the detrimental impact of chronic stress and uncertainty. In this regard, the teacher ceases playing the role of a lone source of content and instead becomes the facilitator of healing-centered learning. The method necessitates sensitivity and reflexivity in the emotional dimension higher than the methods of traditional instruction, entailing the need on the part of the educators to be sensitive to the presence of their own biases and triggers and to act empathically instead of judgmentally in scenarios where the challenging behaviors can manifest. Due to these invariances of related practices, combined with regular routines, clarity of expectations, and avenues of student voice, the classroom can transform into a safer environment that welcomes the taking of risks, imaginative activities of creativity, and an ability to venture and persist in pursuing academic excellence.

Additionally, cultural responsiveness does not constitute a side aspect of trauma-informed pedagogy, but it is at the core of how well the pedagogy works. In the case of immigrant and minority students, trauma may be interwoven with an experience of cultural displacement or discrimination or historical oppression. In that regard, teachers should not only be trauma-sensitive but also culturally competent. This includes ensuring that students are affirmed through specific curriculum content, drawing on language inclusions, and acknowledgements of diversities in ways of knowing and expression. Gherardi (2022) states that trauma-informed strategies need to be equity-based, that is, they signal the structural and social issue that led to trauma in the first place. By affirming the cultural backgrounds of students and scrutinizing deficit-based discourses, teachers can break cycles of marginalization and create environments of healing and growth. Integrating the process of culturally responsive practices of trauma-informed instruction in daily teaching is therefore not merely an optional procedure, but a must-take to ensure inclusive schools that cater to the needs of the complete range of learners.

3. Special Education Needs among Immigrant and Minority Students

Special education needs among immigrant and minority students may point to a common set of problems that interfere with the emotional stability and academic growth of youngsters. These challenges are preconditioned by the combination of the language barrier, cultural disagreement, traumatic experiences, and the needs based on disability. On the one hand, a lot of students with few English skills and little knowledge about the cultural norms may enter the school system easily (Boukhari, 2025). At the same time, disabilities can either be undiagnosed or misperceived, particularly when overlapped by the mental impact of pre- and post-migration trauma (Rasidi, Rosli and Khairuddin, 2025). This compound interlocking puts the students in danger of learning exclusion and emotional isolation, especially in environments where there are no trauma-informed and culturally responsive practices. Due to the refinement of knowledge of the real needs of minorities with special needs, as Alhassan and Sjors (2025) emphasize, in most instances, educators are not well-educated on how to teach and interact with these learners, particularly in the context of the special need's minorities.

Marginalization also worsens as students get exposed to culturally uninformed processes of referrals. The process of being referred to special education does not take into consideration any trauma, language, or cultural behavior that can resemble a learning or behavioral disability in most schools. According to Cheng (2025), teachers and school leaders often have no training in distinguishing trauma responses and actual developmental disorders. Subsequently, immigrant students, especially of a non-dominant culture, can be falsely diagnosed or not diagnosed at all, which leads to their either being overrepresented in special education or not receiving the needed service. According to Shah (2024), this mismatch between supply and need contributes to systemic injustice and narrows the availability of specialized help.

Institutional and systemic failures further reinforce these disparities. Most of the educators join the profession unprepared to be trauma-informed or inclusive in practices. The author claims that the intersections of trauma, disability, and culture are largely ignored in teacher education programs; thus, practitioners are not prepared to tackle realities of diverse classrooms (Mason 2022). Majuba et al. (2024) highlight this lack of professional preparation as the reason behind the implementation of classroom conditions in which students fail to find psychological protection and meet their educational requirements. There is also the element of stereotyping and implicit bias that is used in the identification and tracking of the minority learners. Trends of unequal labeling and academic tracking have been identified by Garg et al. (2024), which channel the students of color into the lower academic tracks or separate environments that do not reflect their actual skill level. Pemberton and Edeburn (2021) also observe that such practices are usually justified through those deficit-oriented narratives that explain how immigrant students are problematic on their own instead of potential learners who have to overcome structural challenges.

Behind these scholarly and institutional concerns could be lurking the even more insidious effects of trauma on the cognitive, emotional, and behavioral development of the students. Former forced migrants, displaced individuals, and systematically discriminated students show increased levels of anxiety and dysregulation, as well as problems with memory and attention, which are commonly interpreted as misbehavior and lack of focus (Bednarska, Hasiak, and Kras Ilych, 2019). They have implications on executive functioning because of these reactions related to trauma, which interfere with the development of knowledge of elementary academic skills. Arif (2022) argues that such students remain unsupported and are forced to continue their lives, becoming even more traumatized when they continually relive prior traumas through school settings instead of healing and maturing.

All these factors combine to result in continuous underrepresentation of immigrant and minority students with special education needs in access to equitable educational opportunities. Such is only part of the challenges they face because of impairment at the individual level but is a bigger problem that occurs when the system fails to accommodate all or

well document their experiences. The only way to overcome these obstacles is not just by changing the pedagogical solution; it is also to reconsider the processes of identifying, evaluating, and accommodating students at the intersection of trauma, migration, and disability within institutions.

4. Trauma-Informed Pedagogy: A Bridge Using Significant Practices and Interventions

Trauma-informed pedagogy acts as a revolutionary linkage in educating exclusion and inclusion practice to students (immigrant and minority) with special education needs. Its success is rooted in its deliberate application of inclusive, healing-based practices, which respond to both the affective and academic deficits these learner's encounter. According to Hurless and Kong (2021), an essential element of this strategy is culturally responsive instruction, such as the fact that students are associated with cultures and languages, and they have their own traditions, which are reflected in their attitude to learning. Teachers who respect and accept student's diverse identities achieve a sense of belonging, which is their springboard to succeed academically. According to Guido (2020), an equity-based, trauma-informed teaching approach should be a culturally sustaining practice that respects the stories of students and promotes critical reflections. In the same light, Matalon and Clauss-Ehlers (2023) posit the understanding that creating a multicultural, trauma-responsive classroom ecology enables students to feel identified and respected, which, subsequently, contributes to increasing trust, participation, and resilience.

Language is the other crucial feature of trauma-informed learning among immigrant students. Learning models developed in English Language Teaching (ELT) by building trauma awareness in the approach to teaching inhibit some of the traumatization and encourage active participation. Palanca (2020) offers a new vision of trauma-informed ELT pedagogy in which language learning proves to be not object-centered but relation-based, establishing a classroom atmosphere and using storytelling to empower refugees to learn. Simultaneously, Ramah and Salgado (2024) posit the significance of bilingual education programs and introduce trauma-informed initiatives into teacher preparation. Their study shows that, being prepared to perceive trauma, bilingual teachers can better coordinate the social-emotional growth of the learners, promote linguistic self-esteem, and minimize cultural alienation.

Together with culturally responsive teaching, trauma-sensitive pedagogy is based on a strong social-emotional learning (SEL) and behavior support system. Such systems will develop self-regulation, empathy, and coping skills instead, and such aspects are particularly important to students with trauma and disability. The Pyramid Model, a very common framework in early childhood facilities, involves a tiered approach to education where all learners can be supported, with intensive services focused on children with behavioral and emotional problems. Mostly, Chudzik, Hardy, and Corr (2025) were able to determine that the implementation of trauma-informed practices by special education teachers within a Pyramid Model classroom led to improvements in the behavior of students and the classroom climate in general. Chudzik, Corr, and Fisher (2023) also emphasize the importance of early intervention and wraparound service, which deals not only with school-related problems but also with external factors that can cause them, i.e., housing instability, family trauma, and access to mental health care.

The second pillar to trauma-informed practice is preparing the pedagogy and the physical classroom space to suit the needs of accessibility and involvement. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an approach to teaching with flexibility in mind by accommodating and expecting many needs in a codependent manner, as opposed to adding solutions reactively after the fact. It promotes various forms of representation, expression, and interaction and so enables students of diverse cognitive, emotional, and linguistic differences to flourish. Arts-based strategies also show promise in trauma-responsive classrooms. According to Sheppard, Tamar, and Hawkes (2025), drawing, drama, and the other creative modalities contribute to processing trauma in the nonverbal form, as well as to the reinforcement of the academic material in a more comprehensible way. Another trauma-informed tool to help with healing and engagement is experiential learning, which Lewinski, McLaurin, and Herr-Perrin (2025) define as involving a number of experiences. Their research demonstrates that when students are involved with practical, community-engaged learning, they get a feeling of empowerment and meaning that removes the effect of the disempowering helplessness of trauma.

Another pillar of trauma-informed learning is family and community involvement. The fact is that the immigrant families, as well as the families belonging to minority groups, can easily experience difficulties in getting involved because of language distinctions, legal status, or unpleasant past experiences with the institutions. Nevertheless, teachers can subdue these obstacles through a relational approach that would place the families as the partners in their children's schooling. According to Bailey et al. (2023), the fact that programs in which families of refugee backgrounds are engaged depend on culturally sensitive outreach, home visits, and the incorporation of community liaisons to be successful is emphasized. Morrison (2022) too emphasizes the role of trust-building and connectedness in the process of school-based counseling of immigrant children. Considering that all affected people are not exposed to trauma in the

classroom; by extending the trauma-informed practice to the community, an educator can contribute to the establishment of more stable ecosystems that support student well-being in the long term as well as in the short term.

Technology itself is taking an increasingly large role in trauma-informed interventions, especially in helping to meet the dual demands of emotional regulation and academic access. The article by Jiang (2025) investigates the implications of virtual reality (VR) on immigrant students and music therapy that has proven that virtual reality musical experience supports the reduction of anxiety, cultural connection, and cognitive restoration. This application of VR shows how technology is capable of making healing spaces where not only emotions but also knowledge is safe. On another note, as seen in another article by Zhang and Wang (2024), the researchers investigate digital platforms that support students with learning disabilities. Such tools can come to personalize a learning experience and allow both frustration and autonomy when implemented as a trauma-informed strategy. Notably, the incorporation of technology is to be guided by a trauma-informed approach to remain informed about how students may absorb and benefit rather than be subdued by technology and how technology can be used to enhance but not replace human connection.

All these practices, including culturally responsive teaching, social-emotional learning, inclusive teaching methods, family involvement, and technological integration, show the complex strength of trauma-informed teaching. When in effect, when designed and integrated into a system holistically, they establish conditions under which the immigrant and minority students with special education needs are not only accommodated but also empowered to heal, relate, and excel. Such interventions go beyond stopover accommodations to develop a long-term, equity-based inclusion process where the most endangered students are never left behind.

5. Teacher Preparation, Knowledge, and Attitudes

Trauma-informed pedagogy proves to be extremely reliant on teacher readiness and teacher disposition when it comes to assisting students with special needs who immigrate and are minorities. Nevertheless, empirical studies continue to point to existing shortages related to teacher preparation, especially when it comes to inclusive practices and trauma-responsive education. As identified by Alhassan and Sjors (2025), a significant number of teachers, including the experienced ones within inclusive contexts, were assumed to have implicit biases and were characterized as feeling insecure when treating the intersection of special education and cultural diversity. Likewise, O'Connell and Berger (2025) examined teachers who were teaching students with intellectual disabilities and discovered that even though in many instances educators voiced their support of inclusion, they understood elementary or nothing about trauma-informed principles. Although both articles indicate the presence of an attitudinal obstacle, the second one highlights the challenge of translating theory into practice in the absence of or with minimal trauma training available and woven into the fabric of professional development programs.

The unpreparedness is not limited to the attitude but even to the knowledge gaps. According to Mason (2022), teacher education programs have not been effective in integrating trauma literacy and special education preparation, causing professionals to be ignorant of the impact of trauma on behavior, thinking, and interaction. This concern is also supported by Gherardi (2022), who recommends system-level, equity-based changes to teacher training, which will include cross-cultural competence training and psychological safety. Whereas Mason focuses on the divisiveness of existing preparation systems, Gherardi acknowledges that there are larger-scale systems problems that limit change, such as institutional inertia and fragmented educational policies. In combination, these studies implied that substantive professional development cannot simply occur at a workshop; it must form an extension of a reflective practice for an educator.

Innovative training models offer promising pathways toward improvement. Lewinski, McLaurin, and Herr-Perrin (2025) endorse such learning by using simulation in the actual practice and community by having the education personnel directly participate in the real-world situation or environment to see trauma-informed situations. Their model combines reflective dialog, emotional self-awareness, and context-based coaching, which empower teachers not only with the mentality but also with the set of skills required to assist vulnerable students. On the contrary, Anderson, Landy and Sanchez (2023) present a more data- and research-based model, which is based upon data collection, professional coaching, and instructional adaptation. Although both strategies focus on embedded learning, the directions of both groups of authors differ; whereas Anderson, Landy and Sanchez (2023) develop organizational capacity within the higher education environment, Lewinski et al. strive to facilitate emotional intelligence and applied empathy at the K-12 level. The difference between these models portrays the essence of context-dependent training, which should be geared according to level of education, student population, and institutional interests.

Although there have been encouraging movements in the implementation of trauma-informed training, there are still major obstacles that limit the time that trauma-informed training will be used by the masses. According to Gordon-

Littering (2025), most education systems fail to cater to the needs of competing priorities, lack clarity in the accountability structure, and overall lack leadership commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Bednarska, Hasiak, and Kras Ilych (2019) further note that even the very best intentions of high-quality reforms are compromised by teacher burnout predicated on inadequate staffing, emotional overload, and insufficient administrative support. Whereas Gordon-Litréan (2025) takes the position of reflective action research and leadership models on DEI, Bednarska, Hasiak and Kras Ilych (2019) focus on the immediate needs of supportive school cultures and systematic distribution of resources. All of these results indicate that the effective implementation of trauma-informed pedagogy will not be widely used unless powerful policy frameworks, institutional fit, and mental health provisions are introduced and provided to educators themselves.

6. Policy and Systemic Considerations

Policy frameworks and system alignment are critical to the effective implementation of trauma-informed pedagogies in educational practice. There are important acts in the United States, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) that offer a seminal directive of inclusive education. Nevertheless, such policies do not usually provide clear guidelines on trauma responsiveness. According to Gherardi (2022), inasmuch as these federal laws are focused on equity and access, they do not cover the emotions and psychology of student development, especially of immigrant and minority students. Garg et al. (2024) expand this criticism to point out that whereas ESSA promotes school climate enhancement and social-emotional learning, the translation of its promotion into actual, trauma-informed practices is uneven, differing sharply across states and districts. Both researchers recommend more specified federal leadership and stronger alignment of trauma-informed practice with legal accountability systems.

School-wide implementation models, including Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS) and Response to Intervention (RTI), have been promising at an institutional level and helped integrate trauma-informed practices into school activities. In the context of explicitly prioritizing trauma as a pillar consideration, Majuba et al. (2024) provide an account of how MTSS may be used as a means of providing layered mental health support, academic intervention, and family contact, all of which are delivered through a combined effort. In a similar manner, Pemberton and Edeburn (2021) point out the necessity of holistic solutions, arguing that schools that implement trauma-informed structures school wide, as opposed to those applied in individual classrooms alone, have a higher chance of establishing safe, fair, and predictable learning conditions. The comparison of these models shows that they were both focused on tiered intervention and collaborative problem-solving, although the implementation might depend on the training of the staff, ongoing support of the leaders, and continued investment of the resources.

The referral and assessment procedures are also the portions that should undergo systemic changes that should see immigrant students with special education needs correctly tagged and given equitable services. Cheng (2025) points out the problem of trademarked methods of testing by criticizing the importance of standardized assessment devices and teachers reports, which are generally culture-blind, language-blind, and trauma-deaf. Equity-based solutions involve multidimensional rather than one-way assessment, such as narrative-based and culturally responsive observation that takes into account an entire context of a student's experience. In the absence of such shifts, numerous students can be misdiagnosed or left without the provision of the adequate support because of the institutional blind spots.

On the world level, two different case studies provide useful information: the United Kingdom and Nordic countries. According to Hanssen, Harju-Laukkanen, and Sundqvist (2023), Finland and Norway have integrated social welfare and education systems, which increase the reliability of trauma-informed work. Titanotherre and Imad (2023) investigate the development of higher education institutions in the UK, reporting both advances in policy advocacy and difficulties in maintaining staff interest. These international insights imply that an institutional focus paying attention to the trauma-informed practice with the capability of operationalizing it by traversing cultural and administrative borders is the sure path to long-term policy reform success.

7. Conclusion

This paper has addressed the complex role of trauma-informed pedagogy in supporting both academic and emotional injustices facing immigrant and minority students with special education needs. After deconstructing the overlap of the aspects of these issues of trauma, disability, and cultural diversity, it is evident that these impacts on them are not addressed fully by conventional educational structures. The main results indicate the significance of attention to culturally responsive teaching, trauma-sensitive classroom management, inclusive referral processes, and teacher

education that is based on equity. When applied through supportive policy frameworks and whole-school approaches, these ingredients develop the context within which all learners (of any background) are able to succeed. Trauma-informed education is not a subtopic on the fringe of the issue; it is an essential feature of making the learning environment inclusive and effective. Those practices that take the perspective of the lived experience of immigrant and minority students provide a greater sense of belonging and emotional and academic investment. Incorporating trauma awareness in pedagogical practices is more than a corrective measure, as it can enable students to thrive and maximize their potential by portraying their identity and cultivating resilience. The connection of the triad of trauma, culture, and disability through education is feasible, but it is not an option. In an increasingly diverse global classroom, the school needs to transform itself into an ecosystem of empathy, flexibility, and justice, rather than a system of assimilation and standardization. Trauma-informed pedagogy offers the roadmap to that transformation. The key is ensuring the student voice is centralized, structural inequities specialists are dismantled, and support is provided to the educators so that they become a system that thrives on difference and ideally flourishes due to the diversity. Such a change is necessary to create a more inclusive society in which each learner might be valued and empowered to thrive.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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