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Traumatisation, reflection, and recovery: teaching about trauma and students' reflexive engagement with sensitive content

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Abstract

Recent research in trauma-informed pedagogy recommends that tertiary educators consider the risks and benefits of teaching sensitive material and approach the design and delivery of such content with purpose and caution. Engagement with traumatic material can have negative impacts on students' wellbeing. Tertiary students report high rates of trauma exposure, which negatively impacts their social, emotional, and academic functioning. Education is a preparation for the future, and educators of subjects that explore sensitive topics prepare students to work with the most vulnerable members of the community. For this reason, it is impossible to avoid the inclusion of difficult and traumatic material in these subjects. This study explored supportive learning practices in a multidisciplinary course on child abuse and neglect at a regional Queensland university. The findings of this qualitative study illustrate the powerful and transformational capability of trauma-informed reflective practice in the higher education setting. The findings also highlight the therapeutic benefit of reflexive practices for students who engage with traumatic content. The study offers a valuable approach for ensuring equity and support for all students, and for guiding students to reflect on their experiences in a supported manner. This approach maximises student success by recognising that students' stories and histories are an important part of their professional journey.

Keywords Trauma · Higher education · Reflective practice · Trauma-informed · Teaching and learning

Introduction

Recent research in trauma-informed pedagogy recommends that tertiary educators consider the risks and benefits of teaching sensitive material and approach the design and delivery of such content with purpose and caution (Cless & Nelson

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Goff, 2017; Miller, 2001). Importantly, trauma-informed educators must recognise where this concerns teaching about trauma or difficult content, and teaching trauma-affected students—or, perhaps, both. This study explores supportive learning practices in a multidisciplinary course on child abuse and neglect at a regional Queensland university. The course was anecdotally reported to be challenging in content because it deals with case studies and real-life scenarios that directly explore child maltreatment. These challenges are compounded when a person who has a history of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) undertakes study of this subject matter, as is often the case, since there is a recognised association between cumulative harm and the decision to begin a career in the helping professions (Bryce et al. 2023). The course evaluation data reveal that students report a range of negative impacts and emotions during the semester. These experiences range from feelings of discomfort and distress to disengagement culminating in drop-out, with students often explaining that they have been 'triggered' by the learning content. As a result, students report high levels of anxiety and distress as barriers to their learning engagement and success. This article develops our understanding of how reflexive practice can constitute a useful tool for reading 'triggering' texts in the helping professions, particularly when affective responses are enmeshed with lived experiences of childhood maltreatment and adversity (Boyle et al., 2021; Brown et al., 2022; Cole et al., 2022; George et al., 2022; Bryce et al., 2023). The helping professions, in this context, are defined as those professions that support the welfare of individuals and that address challenges in a person's physical, psychological, intellectual, and emotional wellbeing. These professions include, but are not limited to, psychology, nursing, counselling, social work, education, and the human services (Egan, 2006).Teaching about trauma, and teaching about trauma to students who have trauma histories, can arise in the higher education context, and particularly in the study of the helping professions. This article considers the implications of this for students and educators, and offers strategies for minimising traumatic responses.

Prevalence of trauma histories among higher education students

University students report high rates of trauma exposure and experience, with the most common traumatic events reported by university students relating to household dysfunction, life-threatening injury or illness, the sudden death of a loved one, natural disaster, and physical violence (Avant et al., 2011; Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011). Frazier et al.'s (2009) multisite study of four universities in the United States (US), investigated the nexus between students' experiences with traumatic events and the risk of probable post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Frazier et al. (2009) found that 85% of participants had experienced a traumatic event before entering university. Distress levels were particularly high in those participants who had a lifetime exposure to family violence, sexual assault, and unwanted sexual attention, with the highest level of probable PTSD associated with trauma resulting from sexual assault. Similarly, Read et al. (2011) found not only that 66% of participants drawn from across two US universities reported exposure to trauma in

their lifetime, but that trauma exposure is likely to increase while students are at university.

These results are significant because they reflect the probability of students developing PTSD while at university, as well as related difficulties which can impede academic progression, such as social isolation, substance abuse, and aggression (Read et al., 2011). High rates of exposure put students at substantial risk of retraumatisation and/or vicarious trauma (Carello & Butler, 2015). Concerningly, students with trauma histories are at a higher risk of developing anxiety and depression, engaging in substance abuse, experiencing difficulties in adjusting to university, having a lower grade point average, and discontinuing their studies (Thompson & Carello, 2022). Indeed, the literature indicates that individuals who have been exposed to trauma may experience difficulty adjusting to higher education (Read et al., 2011). In addition, they may achieve poorer academic outcomes (DeBerard et al., 2004; Smyth et al., 2008), suffer from increased mental health problems, and be more likely to disengage or drop out (Guttierez & Guttierez, 2019; Read et al., 2011). A survey conducted by the National Alliance on Mental Illness (NAMI) (2011) reported a student dropout rate of 64% due to mental health-related reasons. Concerningly, 45–50% of students who stopped attending university for these reasons did not have access to mental health support services and did not receive appropriate accommodations while studying (NAMI, 2011). These data raise concerns about the significant number of university students who suffer from the impact of traumatic experience. The findings also point to the need for adequate and appropriate support services to reduce re/traumatisation and dropout rates among vulnerable students.

Experiences of students exposed to traumatic content

A significant body of evidence documents the impact of indirect exposure to trauma on helping professionals, including preservice students, particularly for those who have a trauma history. For instance, Didham et al.'s (2011) study of undergraduate and postgraduate Canadian social work students (n = 58) reported that students were exposed to a broad range of traumatic events upon university admission and that social work students were further exposed because of their field practicums. Consequently, these students reported changes in sleeping, eating, concentration, confidence, and academic performance. Where they occur, students' negative responses to stories of others' trauma can fall on a spectrum from overwhelming to debilitating, and are often linked to the initial triggering elements, as well as the individual's personal resilience and ability to navigate sensitive content (Carello & Butler, 2014; Cunningham, 2004; Durfee & Rosenberg, 2009; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015). Exposure to the traumatic narratives of others—for example, through the reading of case studies or through class sharing—puts students at risk of retraumatisation, as well as secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, and burnout (Butler et al., 2017; Cunningham, 2004; Knight, 2019; Shannon et al., 2014; Zosky, 2013). Unlike retraumatisation, however, individuals can experience secondary traumatic stress, vicarious traumatisation, and burnout without having a trauma history. Existing literature often uses the terms 'secondary trauma', 'compassion fatigue', and

'vicarious traumatisation' interchangeably. Although compassion fatigue and secondary trauma refer to similar physical, psychological, and cognitive symptoms that individuals may encounter when they work specifically with clients who have histories of trauma, vicarious trauma usually refers more explicitly to specific cognitive changes, such as changes in one's worldview and sense of self (SAMSHA, 2014). Secondary stress is the emotional duress experienced when an individual hears about the firsthand trauma experiences of another (Bride et al., 2004). Compassion fatigue is a consequence of this, presenting as a loss of empathy for, and frustration with, service users from the amassed effects of hearing about another's trauma, and disappointment associated with not being able to help the traumatised person (Tsantefski et al., 2020). Burnout, on the other hand, refers to the cumulative effect of exposure to another's trauma, which can result in the gradual onset of feelings of hopelessness, disillusionment, and distress. These feelings can cause the individual to encounter difficulties in dealing with their work or in doing one's job effectively (Craig & Sprang, 2010, p. 322).

A trauma-informed tertiary educator must be aware of the implications of their course material both for students with trauma histories, and for students exploring difficult content, categories which may well overlap.

Trauma-informed pedagogy in higher education

Education literature outlines various definitions of *trauma-informed pedagogy* and uses the term interchangeably with *crisis-informed pedagogy*. The consensus in the literature is that trauma-informed pedagogy is a teacher's understanding of the pervasiveness of trauma and their willingness to accommodate this reality by promoting a safe learning environment. This environment should 'cultivate empowerment and connectedness' (Imad, 2022, p. 29) and draw on trauma-informed principles 'to promote healing and learning' (Thompson & Carello, 2022, p. 5). Importantly, a trauma-informed approach to learning does not aim to erase trauma; rather, it is designed to enhance teaching about trauma and to alleviate and reduce damaging experiences and responses (Harrison et al., 2023). There is a need for further research into trauma-informed practice in higher education because of the growing awareness that recognising and responding to trauma experiences improves educational outcomes, develops resilience, and prevents retraumatisation (Baker & Naidoo, 2024; Carello & Butler, 2015; Carello & Thompson, 2022; Harrison et al., 2023).

Of the work that does exist, reflexivity and structured affective examination is proposed as effective. For instance, Harrison et al. (2023) explore the impacts of teaching about traumatic events (such as the Holocaust or genocide) on preservice teachers. Students initially reported strong emotional reactions that indicated 'heightened arousal and defensive dissociation' (p. 100). However, when students engaged with these kinds of traumatic narratives through a process of 'reflexivity', this produced the most effective learning outcomes (Harrison et al., 2023). Specifically, reflexivity allowed students to recognise themselves in a case study and to reflect on their own trauma experiences. As a result, a shared vulnerability

was developed between the people in the case study and the students, leading to strong emotional responses, intensified arousal, and defensive dissociation, culminating in what Harrison et al. term 'fleeting impacts of vicarious trauma' (2023, p. 192).

Earlier studies report positive psychological and emotional outcomes for students whose learning is guided by trauma-informed principles. Shannon et al. (2014) found that journaling and mindfulness-based activities were effective ways for students to alleviate stress when studying traumatic content. Similarly, 'safety strategies', as termed by Agllias (2012), were implemented into curriculum to provide students with tools to minimise stress and trauma when engaging with upsetting content. Participants reported that their emotional wellbeing was positively influenced through education in, and the recognition of these safety strategies, including self-care practices, a supportive classroom culture, a transparent curriculum, and the ability to 'debrief' when in a heightened state. One study by O'Bryan et al. (2015) does reject the idea of acknowledging students' emotional responses because doing so can result in students 'paying closer attention to the distress produced by trauma cues,' thereby 'reinforcing that cues are anxiety-provoking, and resulting in greater physiological arousal' (p. 135). However, the research on trauma-informed educational practices generally confirms that individuals who have been exposed to trauma must have continuous opportunities to identify possible retraumatisation and vicarious trauma presentations in order to safeguard and strengthen their wellbeing (Baker & Naidoo, 2024; Brunzell et al., 2021).

In an effort to reduce both the risk of trauma responses to sensitive learning content, and to ameliorate the impact on students, several academics have published strategies and guidelines for teaching about trauma (Carello & Butler, 2014, 2015; Gilin & Kauffman, 2015; O'Halloran & O'Halloran, 2001; Zurbriggen, 2011). There is a consensus that supports the integration of learning about secondary traumatic stress, vicarious trauma, compassion fatigue, burnout, and self-care into curriculum. Trauma-informed teaching in higher education emphasises a learner-centred approach, maximising benefits and minimising risks through the conscious design of the learning environment and clear strategies for safe knowledge acquisition (Carello & Butler, 2014; Heath, 2017). According to Carello and Butler (2014):

> teaching about trauma is essential to comprehending and confronting the human experience … to honour the humanity and dignity of both trauma's victims and those who are learning about them, education must proceed with compassion and responsibility toward both. (p. 164)

Despite emerging momentum for the integration of trauma awareness and sensitivity in tertiary curricula, there is only a small body of emerging research on retraumatisation through learning, or on the use of trauma-informed principles to inform curriculum development and delivery. Baker and Naidoo (2024) provide a reassuring example of scholarly endeavours which explore curriculum development and delivery, arguing that universities be made more accountable for providing support services that meet students of refugee backgrounds (and other vulnerable students') needs, with trauma-informed program design developed in close consultation with these students.

Developing resilience through reflection

The aim of this study is to inform how students' resilience can be enhanced as part of their professional training, and to assist them in navigating and persevering with challenging material. To do so, the researchers drew on the concept of 'reading resilience', initially designed for the literary studies classroom, and defined as 'the ability to read and interpret complex and demanding literary texts' (Douglas et al., 2016, p. 254). However, this concept is also learning focussing on the helping professions, because engaging with difficult and confronting narratives in terms of both interpretation and response is an important part of students' professional development. For this reason, reading resilience is a transferable skill that extends to subjects as diverse as history, psychology, legal studies, social work, and the creative arts. Carello and Butler (2014, 2015) suggest that educators, and educational institutions more broadly, have a responsibility to support students to become trauma-informed and to build the capacity to recognise and respond constructively to difficult or confronting situations and conversations in their future professional lives. Indeed, Heath (2017) recognises that, while 'students may not feel comfortable attending class when particular subjects are being discussed (such as suicide, sexual assault, or the death of a baby) […] these issues cannot always be avoided in the 'real world' of professional practice' (p. 11). In other words, while students might choose to opt out of difficult conversations in class, the opportunity to withdraw might not be responsible, advisable, or even possible in the workplace. Therefore, as a skills-based imperative, reading resilience is designed to absorb disruption while at the same time maintaining focus and function. For this reason, reflective practice is at the heart of becoming a competent and confident practitioner, with the ability to explore and critically analyse one's self and one's work a requirement stipulated by all relevant accrediting and endorsing bodies. On a pedagogical level, one widely adopted model of learning that privileges critical questioning and collective witnessing is Boler's (1999) 'pedagogy of discomfort'.

A pedagogy of discomfort is a model of learning that invites students to engage in critical inquiry by challenging their closely held beliefs and values, and by interrogating the way in which they have come to know and perceive others. Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort engages students in a 'collective, critical discourse through which their sense of self in relation to others becomes the groundwork for their professional and moral development' (Aultman, 2005, p. 265). Through this process, students, as emerging professionals, critique the values and beliefs held by existing and past professionals, and begin to recognise themselves as practitioners in relation to their clients, mentors, and colleagues. This generates a *person-in-environment* perspective and encourages the student to reflect on the *use of self* in their professional practice. Importantly, through critical refection, students are positioned as witnesses to social injustices rather than spectators (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006, p. 1028).

Reflective practice and transformation

Allowing and encouraging students to engage in regular and explicit reflective exercises in the form of a trauma-informed reflective practice journal will assist them to gain the skills to critically understand their responses to the learning material. Bain et al. (2002) provide a model of reflective practice designed to achieve this through the five stages of Reporting and Responding, Relating, Reasoning, and Reconstructing. This process (known as the '5 Rs') guides students' understanding of what is involved in critical reflection and enables students to understand and manage their emotional needs when engaging with traumatic content. Students who use the 5Rs to construct and analyse written reflections form more insightful reflections and gain a deeper understanding of reflection topics (Bain et al., 2002) than those who do not use the framework. The 5Rs framework supports students to move beyond description of their experience to a reflexive engagement with their reactions and intrinsic responses to promote transformational change (Carrington & Selva, 2010). This model also shows how reflective practice begins with personal responses to an issue, and then encourages the use of theory in order to explain and analyse experience, ideally leading to change (Bain et al., 2002; Ryan & Ryan, 2013). Carrington and Selva (2010), for example, examine the capacity of service-learning reflection logs and the 5Rs framework to facilitate transformational change in preservice teachers. Carrington and Selva found that the 5Rs connect the relationship 'between self-reflection, ideological critique, and the challenge to the status quo that can come with transformational learning' (2010, p. 49). This approach reflects the pedagogical theory of transformative learning (Cagney, 2014), which asserts that perspective transformation in learning begins with a 'disorientating dilemma' that unsettles and challenges the student, then compels the student to critically examine the assumptions and beliefs that have led to their interpretation of this experience. This is followed by a reframing of the student reality to accommodate these new perspectives and meanings.

Building on the findings of previous studies and to contribute to the evidence base for this area, the study sought to consider three main problems: (1) what students find difficult when reading about child abuse and maltreatment; (2) how practices of reflection and reflexivity aid students in coming to terms with these difficulties; and (3) what such practices can tell us about our responses to read, learning, and trauma. Information pertaining to each stage of the 5Rs was outlined in the student assessment materials to support the questions in the journal. Reading about uncomfortable and traumatic content can stimulate intense emotional reactions; therefore, in order to support students' emotional and physical comfort, the journals were completed outside of class. The 5Rs framework scaffolds students to link their self-reflection with their ideological analyses, and to challenge the status quo, perhaps leading to transformational change (Carrington & Selva, 2010). The journal questions were designed in accordance with Herman's (1997) Triphasic Model of Trauma Recovery, in which students are guided to proceed through the three phases of safety, mourning, and reconnection. The aim of this model is to allow for an increasing exposure to traumatic content in order for the individual to gain a sense of control of their reactions to traumatic events (Zaleski et al., 2016). The safety phase refers

to an individual's ability to self-regulate and control their nervous system's response to trauma (Zaleski et al., 2016). The remembrance and mourning phase proceeds after the successful control of the individual's nervous system in the safety phase. In this stage, the individual engages with their trauma to transform their traumatic memories into the 'survivor's life story' (Herman, 1992, quoted in Zaleski et al., 2016, p. 175). Stallman et al., (2017, p. 90) supports the importance of this stage and explains that 'resilience develops from experiencing distress, coping with it, and learning from the experience'. The final stage, reconnection, explains how an individual's mind and body has adapted to the trauma to increase their power and control. The reflective journal supported students when structuring their writing as the prompt questions guided responses from personal reactions and descriptions to more complex responses involving theory and experience.

Qualitative reflective data were collected through open-ended questions which allowed the researcher 'to get at the inner experience of participants … and to discover rather than test variables' (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 12), and to identify and describe the complexity and richness of views held by participants (Denscombe, 2008).

Methods

Participants

Participants were either enrolled in postgraduate subject *EDU5325 Understanding Child Abuse and Neglect* or its undergraduate equivalent, *EDU3325 Child Abuse and Neglect for Helping Professionals*. Both iterations of the course provide an advanced study of child abuse and protection issues that present in various ecological environments. The students enrolled in these courses are typically studying counselling, psychology, criminology, or human services. The specific trauma histories of students, nor the number of students who identified as experiencing trauma in their past is not known. Although the journal was an assessable task in the course, the students were not required to provide permission for their entries to be used for the purpose of this study: that aspect was entirely voluntary, and had no bearing on their grade for the course. Students were provided participant information via the online course site and were asked to indicate their willingness to participate by including a consent form with their assessment submission. Of a total 99 enrolments in *EDU5325*, 54 consented to participate, and of 52 enrolments in *EDU3325*, 27 consented to participate, providing a total participant cohort of 81 students. Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the University of Southern Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC), Approval Number ETH2023-0437.

Data collection

The trauma-informed reflective practice journal was integrated into core learning activities as a participation assessment.[1] Students were required to reflect on the course content while considering their own affective responses, and encouraged to be analytical about their own reading practices. The task of reading was made 'visible' and measurable by assigning a summative assessment score that was designed to guide students to feel in control of their learning (Douglas et al., 2016). Three frameworks were used in the development of questions for the reflection responses: Douglas et al.'s reading resilience framework (2016); Boler's pedagogy of discomfort in engaging in critical inquiry (1999); and Herman's triphasic model of trauma recovery: safety, remembrance and mourning, and reconnection (1997). Participants were encouraged to progress through Bain et al.'s (2002) 5Rs model of reflective practice when responding to the questions. Questions about topics that were uncomfortable, along with questions about strategies to assist with reading difficulties or challenges, were included. The assessment task materials outlined the 5Rs model, providing a summary of the stages and a criterion group reflecting each stage in the reflection journal marking rubric. Participants shared their reflections through critical reflective responses to between five and seven questions, with up to one hundred words per response, at three different intervals across the 12-week semester (Weeks 2, 8, and 12). The journal entries and prompts were not intended to be an interrogation of their trauma histories or experiences, but were rather a tool to assist students to navigate affective responses and discomfort and unpack their reactions. Students were provided with comprehensive instructions and templates for these tasks as a means of preparing the students for their reflective practice and prevent unintended consequences, such as retraumatisation. As these reflections formed part of a broader trauma-informed approach in the course, the specific nature of which is beyond the scope of this paper, information on support services for students was readily available.

Data analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was applied to the responses in the reflective practice journals to explore the role of reflection as a tool to support students' engagement with sensitive content. The data were analysed using six recursive phases as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2021). First, in the *familiarisation phase*, electronic data files were deidentified and imported into the data analysis software, NVivo. Then, data were interrogated through a process of repeated reading in order to facilitate data immersion (Braun & Clarke, 2019). During this phase, preliminary thoughts and ideas were written down

[1] The journal was submitted at three points in the semester (weeks 2, 8, 12); questions were low stakes and casually framed. They included: What views of child maltreatment and protection do you hold coming into this course? Do you think this content is relevant to your professional journey—why/why not? What value has discomfort had for you in your learning journey in this course?

about both individual data items, and the dataset as a whole, to support making sense of the data in light of the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Next, in the *generating codes phase*, each reflection was systematically coded with a focus on references to instances of (1) uncomfortable content; and (2) reflective practices. First-order codes were developed through the procedure of engaging with the data, concentrating on participants' answers relating to causes of discomfort, responses to discomfort, remedies to alleviate discomfort, benefits of reflection, and reading strategies implemented. To begin with, most codes were semantic as they reflected 'explicit meaning, close to participant language', such as a student's response highlighting the cause of their discomfort. As the analysis progressed, patterns began to emerge across the data that produced more latent codes as they focused on a 'deeper, more implicit or conceptual level of meaning' (Braun et al., 2019, p. 853), such as where reflection practices encouraged participants to adopt a 'critical and curious lens' to interrogate new knowledge. Once coding was completed, the investigators met to discuss their coding. Investigator triangulation allowed collaboration to confirm similarities or differences in data, and in turn greater credibility of data (Thurmond, 2001). Investigator triangulation also allowed for increased validity and reliability of individual investigators' coding and, therefore, more consistent alignment of emerging themes in the subsequent phases (Thurmond, 2001).

After codes were developed, analysis concentrated on the *generating initial themes phase*, where the codes were sorted into 'topic areas or clusters of meaning' (Braun et al., 2019, p. 855). Again, this was conducted in NVivo, where parent codes were grouped into more specific and meaningful segments of information, commonly known as child codes. After sorting and grouping codes, nine initial themes emerged that related to experiences of participants, causes and reactions to discomfort, reading difficulties, positive reflection practices, triggers, new knowledge, motivation, and reconstructed knowledge. These themes were then applied to the research questions to assess their suitability.

Next, phases four and five were completed together—the *refining and defining phase* and the *naming themes phase*. The investigators met again to discuss initial themes considering the three research questions. Each investigator presented their initial themes and discussed the specific information that developed each theme. Then, collaboratively, the investigators grouped their initial themes into overarching themes.

Findings

Three exploratory and illustrative themes were induced from the data: (1) confrontation and discomfort; (2) reflection and relatability; and (3) motivation and transformation.

Confrontation and discomfort

Analysis of the student reflections revealed that all topics studied in *EDU5325* were difficult to engage with, although some more so than others. The majority of students found child sexual abuse the most confronting topic, with some participants explicitly stating this. The use of case studies detailing the sexual abuse of children was confronting and produced discomfort in some participants. As Participant 30 reflects, 'the [case study's] disclosure [of] having experienced sexual abuse since the age of three sparked thoughts of unfairness and the amount of pain she has already endured'. Many participants found the long-term impacts of abuse the most difficult content to engage with, specifically 'the long-term effects for victims' (P25), and 'the impacts that child abuse and neglect can have on a person's lifespan' (P26). Some participants also found that their role as a parent or guardian exacerbated their discomfort when learning about child abuse.

Moreover, several participants found the prevalence of abuse types challenging and used statistics to help quantify the pervasiveness of different types of abuse. Perhaps, this activity contextualised the abuse for some participants, helping them to justify and understand their own discomfort. For example, the following extracts highlight the discomfort that arose for some students after learning about the pervasiveness of abuse: 'the most uncomfortable information was the data from the World Health Organization (2016) which identified that, globally, one-in-five women has suffered sexual abuse' (P34), and 'I did initially encounter difficulties in reading the statistics regarding child abuse and neglect as its prevalence in modern Western society completely shocked and appalled me' (P32). Participant 51 expands on this revelation further:

> I was aware that child abuse and neglect was a prevalent problem, but I was astounded as I read the statistics of prevalence and learned that there were multiple implications for children who have suffered child abuse and neglect. I had underestimated the prevalence, and the overrepresentation of Indigenous children.

Another finding revealed that students' engagement with sensitive and traumatic content was confronting and produced intense feelings, often similar to those associated with compassion fatigue. In an attempt to articulate their strong emotional response to the content, participants used words such as 'guilt', 'disgust', 'anger', 'distress', 'sadness', and 'unhappiness'. For example, Participant 49 illustrated their emotional reaction to the content (and, incidentally, revealed a misunderstanding of the development of professional resilience), sharing: 'I found it challenging not to relate to the content … I experienced a series of feelings including anger, distress, and powerlessness'. Self-limiting feelings of despair and disconnection can indicate a trauma response as a result of previous trauma experience or exposure (SAMHSA, 2014). Participant 30's response, for example, captured these limiting feelings: 'the topic of sexual abuse triggers uncomfortable feelings of emptiness, helplessness, and isolation'. Further analysis revealed that Participant 30 had, in fact, been a victim of sexual abuse, as this participant went on to disclose that 'the most uncomfortable and difficult topic to

engage with has been that of sexual abuse. My own personal lived experiences have included elements of trauma related to this topic'. Therefore, Participant 30's response could indeed be indicative of retraumatisation.

In addition, some participants reported negative physical sensation as a response to their engagement with traumatic content. Participant 49 found the learning material 'very confronting and upsetting' and, at times, even felt 'physically unwell'. Similarly, some physical responses were triggered by personal traumatic memories as a result of engaging with uncomfortable topics: 'when I find particular cases triggering, I get drawn back immediately into traumatic memories. Sometimes these memories cause physical sensations, such as dry retching' (P10). Several participants' emotional and physical distress was intensified as memories of their own traumas were triggered by the course material. The following extracts from the student journals articulate the potential for retraumatisation: 'as a result of my experiences of incest, reading about topics of familial sexual abuse often gives me physical reactions. It can also trigger memories, which then work their way into my dreams' (P10); 'the topics that touched on domestic violence were the most difficult as they triggered my past experiences' (P44); 'intimate partner violence has really caught my attention given my own experience within this space' (P17); 'the most uncomfortable topic has been sexual abuse by far. I have mentioned previously that I would find this topic difficult, being a survivor of sexual abuse' (P11); 'I was surprised at my reaction when reading sections about intimate partner violence, as it brought back many memories I hadn't thought of in a long while' (P50); and '[a case study about child sexual assault] ultimately faced me with some of my own demons' (P31).

In addition, while it is not explicitly related to the inclusion of traumatic content, some participants found the reading especially difficult in regard to their interpretation and processing of content, their understanding of the terminology used, and the volume of reading material. Numerous participants found the law and legislation topic challenging to engage with due to 'wordiness' and their limited understanding of current legislation. Participant 7 experienced difficulty with the reading due to the respective texts being 'law-specific', and therefore outside their professional understanding:

> I found the reading in Module 7 [Child Protection Legislation] to be heavy going … the legislation documents are written to be used within the law … most of them are not easy to read, are incredibly wordy, and appear to duplicate ideas. (P7)

Participants also had difficulty discriminating between the most important aspects of the reading: 'my main difficulty has been the scope of information to process about this important topic. Every piece of information has merit' (P26). Participant 4 explained that the volume of reading or 'quantity of content' was difficult. Multiple participants found the case studies difficult to read, which resulted in students experiencing processing difficulties. Participant 27, for instance, found the case studies 'difficult to read and digest. One participant explained that their lack of understanding of terminology created comprehension difficulties: 'some of the vocabulary used in the Risk and Protective Factors

Module was somewhat challenging, such as 'victimology', 'victim precipitation', and 'revictimisation'' (P7).

Reflection and relatability

Many of the participants wrote about the positive and remedying effects that reflection played in their ability to manage their emotions when engaging with uncomfortable material. For these participants, reflection was a tool that supported their emotional regulation, with some participants even pre-empting how reflective practice might be beneficial in their future professions: 'the reflections required you to sit with strong emotions at times … working through emotions is a better long-term strategy than dismissing them' (P11). Participant 23 explained that:

> the critical reflections helped me cope with the confronting content as it provided me with the time to self-reflect. The questions guided my reflection and really got me to think about how these topics have affected me and encouraged me to develop strategies to cope in this situation.

A number of participants with trauma histories related their experiences of abuse with the subject content, which created a mixture of both discomfort and comfort, as well as a desire to learn more about specific forms of abuse that were considered 'relatable'. One participant drew attention to how their reflection on the prevalence of abuse assured them that they were not alone in their own experience of abuse, thus creating a sense of relatability: 'it assured me that, firstly, I wasn't alone with my trauma. Looking at the statistics for sexual abuse, it was outstanding the number of women and children that are affected each year' (P31). Another participant explained that the reflective journal was 'a positive tool' that allowed them to process their own trauma: 'the journal has been enlightening on many levels; it has allowed me to process some of my own trauma but also to actively support my students at school' (P25). Some participants with trauma histories managed their discomfort by seeking out further understanding of the risk factors, signs, and reasons for the abuse they were subjected to. As Participant 25 explains, 'the way I manage this discomfort is to research and read on the topic to understand how and why these maltreatments occur and what my primary caregivers' deficits were'.

The reflective journal invited students to identify and address their feelings of discomfort and prompted the use of other adaptive coping strategies, such as undertaking counselling or engaging in peer discussion. For Participant 20, 'feeling this way made me reach out to other professionals to have professional discussions', while for Participant 25, 'the discomfort I had in this course actually prompted me to have a discussion with my parents … I have also been in regular contact with a counsellor and psychologist regarding coping and managing my childhood trauma and cumulative harm' (P25). In addition, several participants explained that feeling uncomfortable positively impacted their learning because it led to a deeper understanding of the course material. Participant 20 experienced 'greater learning and understanding the more uncomfortable [they] felt', while Participant 32 reflected that 'my discomfort forced me to confront my difficulty with child sexual abuse and allowed me to

develop a deeper understanding of the risk factors and the effects these risks have on children, as well as the future ramifications of not taking action' (P32).

The process of reflexivity encouraged multiple students to adopt a curious and critical lens when engaging with traumatic material. Specifically, in order to minimise their discomfort, some participants sought further understanding of confronting topics: 'the more I read, the more I noticed a shift occurring in my thoughts and emotions, so I sought further information from articles and readings' (P42). Participant 44 explained that deep engagement with the course content even allowed them to approach their trauma from a new perspective:

> I was able to see my own experiences through a different lens. Although uncomfortable, and at times triggering, there were other ways that I was positively affected and that was through a mix of validation, catharsis, deeper understanding, and more language to describe child abuse and neglect, which is not only helpful professionally but also on a personal level.

Motivation and transformation

The findings reveal that students inherently dislike being in a state of discomfort, with their natural inclination to return to a sense of comfort. In the classroom, there are a number of ways this can happen, perhaps most obviously by simply opting out of the situation (for example, not participating in class discussions, or not completing the coursework, the set reading, or even assessment). However, through reflection, students were able to use their discomfort to motivate an improvement to their professional practice. For these students, the journal channelled their discomfort into a desire to attain new skills or knowledge. Participant 2 demonstrated their ability to use the journal to reflect critically on their learning and even on research methods in the discipline:

> I wonder if the percentages [the provided statistics on rates of child sexual abuse] are truly reflective of prevalence. I also wonder how developments in technology impact abuse and our understanding. Finally, as the law typically doesn't keep pace with societal changes, I wonder what work can be done to keep ahead of things like advancements in technology to protect children, adolescents, and people at large.

A number of participants reflected on how their feelings of discomfort motivated them to want to change their practice, their behaviours, and various ecological systems (for example, the home or the workplace) in order to prevent child abuse or to provide support for victims. These participants' responses reflect Boler's (1999) 'call to action' where discomfort leads to transformational personal and professional change: 'it fills me with sadness but also with hope and determination' (P41), and 'the shock from the course content pushed me to want to know more about how to help children in protection and to look into this for my career' (P28). Many participants realised the importance of engaging in professional discussions to gain a deeper understanding of complex abuse topics.

> I have spent time reflecting on how important it is to interact with academic staff and fellow students using the live-stream weekly tutorials, forum posts, and module discussions to share thoughts and obtain regular feedback from lecturers and peers. By interacting in these various ways, a deeper understanding and connection of more complex themes can be gained. (P30)

Multiple participants reconstructed their understanding of child abuse topics and reframed this new knowledge to inform their future practice. Participant 30 reflects that 'my current learnings have helped to expand my view of child protection as everybody's business, not just a mandatory obligation'. Some participants highlight their new understanding of the complexities involved in child abuse cases, and how individualistic each case is in intervention and prevention measures: 'what has changed is the assumption that child abuse and neglect is straight-cut and simple. The complexity in every situation is vast and no one rule can fix or correct the situation' (P40). One participant used their new knowledge to inform their current classroom practice to support a student with higher-level needs: 'I decided to change my classroom structure and management from what I was originally taught to what colleagues had said worked best for them when teaching students with higher-level needs' (P9). Overall, participants were motivated to use their discomfort to benefit their professional endeavours. Participant 5 managed their discomfort 'by looking at the topic with curiosity', while Participant 1 'combatted [their] discomfort head-on and used it to become more passionate about [their] future career'.

Discussion

This study aimed to analyse the role of reflection in developing students' critical reading skills in order to support their engagement with uncomfortable learning material. The key findings include that (a) most participants found the content uncomfortable and expressed their discomfort through strong emotive language; (b) participants with trauma histories expressed intense emotions and may have been retraumatised; (c) reflective practices were effectively used as coping, learning, and motivating tools; and (d) the process of reflexivity created discomfort but encouraged participants to change their professional practice and their interactions with family and friends. In addition, the feelings of discomfort also prompted participants to engage with further readings and materials to improve their understanding of child abuse and neglect.

The need for trauma-informed pedagogies in tertiary education

Several studies have highlighted the negative effects that engagement with traumatic content can have on a student's psychological, social, and academic functioning (Carello & Butler, 2015; Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011). The findings of this study are congruent with prior research, with most participants reporting negative physical reactions and/or intense emotions after engaging with uncomfortable material. Concerningly, the findings from this study are reflective of previous research

that highlight the high prevalence of university students with trauma histories (Avant et al., 2011; Frazier et al., 2009; Read et al., 2011). Indeed, the findings show that some students with trauma histories may have experienced retraumatisation as a result of engaging with the learning content.

A current initiative of many universities is the implementation of universal health and wellbeing strategies that target the entire university population, such as the provision of extra-curricular wellbeing classes, counselling services, check-in services, and social events (Tsantefski et al., 2020). However, there has been minimal university focus on the implementation of trauma-informed pedagogies. In Australia, Griffith University is the first institution to have developed and implemented a trauma-informed tertiary learning and teaching framework (Tsantefski et al., 2020). This interdisciplinary framework was developed to support the teaching of health-related curricula; however, it can be applied to other disciplines as well. The framework supports educators to understand and respond to students who display signs of retraumatisation or vicarious trauma due to the course content, or through in-class learning experiences or learning while on practicum (Tsantefski et al., 2020). Currently, there is no research that examines the validity and effectiveness of this framework; however, it is evident from the findings of both this study, and various other studies, that there is a need to adopt whole-of-university trauma-informed pedagogies that recognise and remediate trauma experiences and responses in higher education settings, particularly for those students with trauma histories.

A call to action: the importance of discomfort

A key finding of this study is that engagement with real-life case studies is difficult for students. The use of case studies and real-life scenarios invites participants to engage with a reflexive narrative; that is, the process where students recognise their life in a case study's story and reflect on their personal experiences of trauma. The findings reveal that the 5Rs framework (Bain et al., 2002) supports participants to engage in the process of reflexivity because it encourages participants to make a personal connection to the learning material and to critically analyse the content by considering other perspectives. However, reflexiveness may still subject the student to retraumatisation or vicarious trauma (Harrison et al., 2023), thus illustrating the importance of implementing both a pedagogy of discomfort and adopting trauma-informed pedagogies to support students' academic, social, and psychological functioning so that they can see the professional value in developing strategies of resilience. It has been suggested that adopting a pedagogy of discomfort can promote resilience and transformational change, both professionally and personally (Thompson & Carello, 2022). Many participants illustrated the powerful and transformational impact that a discomforting pedagogy can offer. Specifically, a pedagogy of discomfort invites students to uncover and question their intrinsic ideologies and to consider the moral and ethical differences of others, which leads to reconstructed knowledge and transformational change (Boler, 1999).

The findings of this study also show that participants use discomfort to inform their studies, their professional practice, and their relationships with family and

peers. However, for some students, this discomfort raises questions for which there are no easy answers. In this instance, discomfort appears to stem from a lack of knowledge pertaining to these questions and, as a result, the discomfort ignites a desire to learn and discover answers. Potentially, this practice can be viewed as a knowledge-gathering process that alleviates discomfort and, in turn, positively influences personal and professional practice. Integrating a pedagogy of discomfort, then, when used in conjunction with critical reading skills and reflexivity, supports students to move from a worldview that 'spectates' to one that bears 'witness'. To spectate, individuals view situations through a lens that identifies with dominant ideologies that only permit a gaping distance of understanding and relatability between themselves and others (Boler, 1999). In contrast, to bear witness allows an individual to develop accountability in how they view themselves and others by encouraging the student to reflect on their modes of listening and response to the traumatic experiences of others. Reflective practice aims to instil this in the student.

The role of reflection and reflexivity

This study illustrates how critical reading skills, reflection, and reflexivity can support students' emotional wellbeing, academic progress, and intrinsic desire for knowledge. The findings reveal that reflection triggers engagement with learning content because participants reflect on the course materials and readings, their affective responses to the content, and their ability to manage their emotional discomfort.

In trauma-informed practice, reflection is considered a critical tool that invites students to explore their thoughts, questions, feelings, and behaviours. Through reflection, students adopt an inquiring mindset that encourages them to 'ask questions or elicit new information to enable a deeper understanding' (Varghese et al., 2018, p. 144). Reflexivity allows students to interrogate their worldviews in order to understand how one's point of view influences their perception of others (Varghese et al., 2018). The reflective journal encourages participants to pause and to think about what they have learned, as well as question assumptions and biases that restrict their understanding (Varghese et al., 2018). This practice supports students to identify gaps in their understanding, which in turn, motivates them to engage in further research to fill gaps in their understanding. As a result, this strengthens their professional practice and knowledge.

The finding that reflective practice encourages participants to want to change their professional practice and various ecological systems (work, home, community) highlights the important and transformational impact that a trauma-informed reflective practice journal can offer in the university setting. Varghese et al., (2018, p. 36) refer to this process as 'reflection-for-action', where reflective practices allow individuals 'to perceive, to see, to understand and make sense of' others. Similarly, an outcome of Boler's (1999) pedagogy of discomfort is a 'call to action' where, through discomfort, individuals act and respond to social injustice. It is possible that by combining a pedagogy of discomfort with reflective practice the motivation for transformational change is improved.

Limitations

Some participants misinterpreted one or more questions in the reflective journal, specifically questions that attempted to elicit reading strategies that participants used to help support their reading. As a result, future consideration should be given to the role of explicit teaching in the transferable skill of reading resilience in disciplines beyond literary studies. Moreover, some participant responses were limited in the quality of content required to inform the questions of this study. Specifically, some responses were non-descriptive and did not allow for further interpretation. In future, follow-up interviews might be beneficial to obtain descriptive narrative data that allows for rich interpretation. Although some responses did indicate potential retraumatisation, no participants disengaged or exited the research due to being retraumatised or experiencing intolerable discomfort or distress.

Implications for practice and possibilities for future research

This small-scale exploratory study has contributed to the current literature that explores the development of transferable reading resilience skills through reflective practice in tertiary education. In addition, this research informs our understanding of how reflective activities that are supported by Bain's 5Rs framework develop curious and critical thinking and potentially lead to transformational change. Further, this study adds to the body of research that informs our understanding of the need to adopt trauma-informed pedagogies and how to promote a pedagogy of discomfort consciously and safely. Finally, this study facilitates at least two possibilities for future research. The first is a longitudinal study that conducts follow-up interviews with participants to examine if participants have transferred critical reading and reflective practices to the professional setting. A second study could investigate the effectiveness of implementing critical reading skills and reflective practices using the 5Rs framework throughout an entire undergraduate degree (for example, the Bachelor of Education). Bain et al. (2002) explain that reflection is not an in-built skill; instead, it requires development and practice. While some scaffolding around the 5Rs was provided in the course, educators should consider creating more explicit opportunities for students to learn the skills and knowledge required for reflexive practice.

Conclusion

Engagement with traumatic material can have negative impacts on students' well-being. Tertiary students report high rates of trauma exposure, which negatively impacts their social, emotional, and academic functioning. Education is a preparation for the future, and educators of subjects that explore sensitive topics essentially prepare students to work with the most vulnerable members of the community. Thus, it is impossible to avoid the inclusion of difficult and traumatic material in

these subjects. As such, this study analysed the role of reflection and reflexivity in developing students' reading resilience. It was anticipated that, by implementing a trauma-informed reflective practice journal, that participants would gain the skills to adopt a critical and curious lens to comprehend and challenge their responses to the materials presented. The findings of this study illustrate the powerful and transformational ability of trauma-informed reflective practice in the higher education setting. The findings also highlight the therapeutic benefit of reflexive practices for students who engage with traumatic content. Thus, this study offers a valuable and effective approach for ensuring equity and support for all students, and for guiding students to reflect on their experiences in a supported manner. This approach maximises student success and recognises that students' stories and histories are an important part of their professional journey.

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Declarations

Competing interests The authors confirm that there are no relevant financial or non-financial competing interests to report.

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