Becoming Trauma-Informed: A Heuristic Inquiry into the Transformative Impact of Trauma-Informed Practice on a Further Education Lecturer in Scotland

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Abstract

This article presents a heuristic inquiry into the personal and professional transformation experienced by a Further Education (FE) lecturer in Scotland through the adoption of trauma-informed practice following training received by College Development Network (CDN). Drawing upon reflective journaling, critical incident analysis, and internal dialogue over a 6-month period, the study explores how trauma-informed pedagogy has redefined the lecturer's understanding of learning, relationships, discipline, and institutional expectations. The study reveals five interconnected themes: shifting from control to connection; the weight of emotional labour; pedagogical reframing; tensions with institutional norms; and the inner work of teaching. These themes illustrate a significant philosophical and emotional shift, from transactional to relational education, from authority to attunement, and from detachment to reflective presence. The study also highlights tensions between trauma-informed values and traditional structures of FE. Concluding with implications for policy and practice, the article argues that truly trauma-informed education must go beyond strategy to include deep personal inquiry and systemic change.

Keywords: trauma-informed teaching, Further Education, Scotland, heuristic inquiry, relational pedagogy, practitioner research, emotional labour, reflective practice

Introduction

In recent years, trauma-informed practice (TIP) has emerged as a vital framework in education, grounded in the understanding that past and ongoing trauma can significantly disrupt a learner's ability to engage, regulate, and succeed in academic environments. Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs), as well as socio-economic instability, discrimination, and intergenerational trauma, are increasingly recognised as central factors influencing educational inequality (Felitti et al., 1998; SAMHSA, 2014).

In Scotland, national policy has begun to acknowledge the importance of nurturing approaches, mental health, and emotional wellbeing in education. However, while trauma-informed practice has gained traction in early years and school settings (Education Scotland, 2021), there remains a substantial gap in its conceptualisation and implementation within Further Education (FE). The FE sector is highly diverse, including young people re-engaging with education, adult returners, and care-experienced learners. Emerging evidence and practitioner accounts indicate that some of these groups *face elevated exposure to adversity or trauma-related challenges* (Education Scotland, 2021). While trauma-informed practice is gaining momentum, a fully coherent framework across the FE sector has *not yet been consistently realised.*

FE lecturers, therefore, find themselves on the frontlines, attempting to meet complex

learner needs without sufficient training or support. As a lecturer in this sector, I encountered trauma not as a theory, but as a reality in my own life, in student stories, behaviours, silences, and absences. I began to explore trauma informed approaches not from a position of expertise but of necessity, following an enlightening training session by CDN. Over time, these practices changed not only how I taught but how I saw teaching itself.

Using heuristic inquiry (Moustakas, 1990), I explore my evolving relationship to teaching, the emotional labour it demands, the systemic tensions it reveals, and the transformation it invites. This research embraces the power of personal reflection, offering an in-depth exploration that brings to light the inner journey of becoming a trauma-informed educator.

Literature Review

Trauma and the Educational Landscape

The United Kingdom Government (2022, para. 2) defines trauma as a "results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as harmful or life threatening. While unique to the individual, generally the experience of trauma can cause lasting adverse effects, limiting the ability to function and achieve mental, physical, social, emotional or spiritual well-being". In educational settings, trauma often manifests in behavioural challenges, absenteeism, emotional dysregulation, and disengagement (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017). These effects can be particularly pronounced in FE, where learners may arrive with a history of disrupted education, care experience, or ACEs.

In Scotland, national frameworks such as *Getting it Right for Every Child (GIRFEC)* and the public health response to ACEs (Scottish Government, 2017) have laid important groundwork for trauma-sensitive practices. However, the FE sector has historically received less attention in policy discourse compared to schools (Kelly & Watson, 2024). This gap is now being actively addressed by the CDN, whose 2023–24 *Trauma-Informed College Programme* aims to embed a trauma-informed culture across every Scottish college. As CDN (2022) highlights, this work reflects an understanding that colleges are more than places of study or routes to qualifications and employment; they are community anchors that bring together individuals, families, and essential services to address wider social and economic issues.

Furthermore, CDN's "The Changing Learner" report (CDN, 2023a) identifies a significant shift in the demographic and emotional needs of the college learner population. The report underscores rising levels of mental health distress, social isolation, and the need for wraparound support, all of which signal the urgency of trauma-informed approaches that are sector-specific and systemic.

Principles of Trauma-Informed Practice

Trauma-informed teaching is grounded in six core principles: safety, trustworthiness, choice, collaboration, and empowerment and cultural consideration (SAMHSA, 2014). These principles translate into classroom strategies such as predictable routines, non-punitive discipline, emotional check-ins, flexible deadlines, and a relational approach to pedagogy (Brunzell et al., 2016).

Importantly, trauma-informed education requires a shift in mindset: from "What's wrong with you?" to "What's happened to you?" It challenges the view of education as purely cognitive and positions learning as relational and emotional.

The Role of the Educator

Trauma-informed practice places significant responsibility on the educator, not only to adapt pedagogy but also to

engage in emotional attunement, boundary-setting, and reflexive practice. The emotional labour required is often invisible and unsupported (O'Toole, 2022). For FE educators, this labour is compounded by complex learner needs, high workloads, and systemic pressures. Yet, as emerging practice in Scottish colleges shows, educators who engage deeply with trauma-informed frameworks often report a parallel journey of personal growth. Trauma-informed teaching becomes not only a professional stance but a transformative ethical commitment.

Heuristic Inquiry and Practitioner Reflection

Heuristic inquiry allows researchers to explore their own experience as a valid and central source of knowledge. Moustakas (1990, p.28) describes it as a process of self-dialogue, immersion, and synthesis in which the researcher "lives the question." In education, heuristic research has been used to uncover the emotional and ethical complexities of practice (Sela-Smith, 2002), making it ideal for exploring the personal impact of trauma-informed work.

This methodological approach aligns with the CDN's call for reflective and practitioner-led change letting the educators becomes a crucial evidence base, one that captures the nuance, challenge, and meaning of working at the intersection of education and care.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a heuristic research design (Moustakas, 1990), a qualitative methodology rooted in phenomenology but distinguished by its deep emphasis on the researcher's personal experience, emotional insight, and reflective transformation. Heuristic inquiry is particularly suited to educational research that involves emotionally charged, value-driven, and practice-based topics such as trauma-informed pedagogy. Unlike traditional empirical methods that seek objectivity and distance, heuristic research embraces subjectivity, intuition, and self-discovery as essential pathways to meaning-making.

Trauma-informed teaching is not merely a set of practices to be observed; it is a lived, embodied process that invites, and often demands, personal transformation for the educator. As such, I positioned myself as the primary participant in the study, engaging with the phenomenon of trauma-informed teaching not from the outside, but from within.

The research was conducted over a 6-month period and was structured around self reflective data sources including bi-weekly reflective journals, critical incident analysis, and written and oral self-dialogues. These were not static records but dynamic, iterative explorations through which new understandings emerged. This immersive process reflects Moustakas' six phases of heuristic inquiry: initial engagement, immersion, incubation, illumination, explication, and creative synthesis. The goal was not simply to collect data but to engage in a sustained and evolving relationship with the research question: *"How does engaging in trauma-informed practice shape my own teaching philosophy and approach as an FE lecturer in Scotland?"*

Data Sources

Reflective Journals

I kept a bi-weekly journal, documenting teaching experiences, emotional responses, observations, doubts, breakthroughs, and challenges. These reflections were written both immediately after classroom events and retrospectively, allowing space for critical self-reflection and emotional processing. Many entries were guided by reflective prompts such as:

- *What happened today that made me rethink my teaching practice?*

These journals became a rich, evolving dataset, revealing not only changes in practice but also shifts in values, emotional responses, and philosophical stance.

Critical Incident Reflections

I identified and explored six critical incidents. These were defined as specific, emotionally resonant classroom moments that stood out as significant turning points or sources of tension. These incidents played out with behaviours and presentation often associated with trauma responses (e.g., student shutdowns, emotional dysregulation, disclosure of trauma) or institutional conflict (e.g., policy clashes). Critical incident analysis allowed me to explore the relational and ethical dimensions of my teaching practice, highlighting where values associated with trauma informed practice came into conflict with long standing educational norms. These moments served as catalysts for growth, often triggering new understandings or shifts in approach.

Dialogues with Self

Inspired by Moustakas' (1990) emphasis on internal dialogue, I engaged in structured written dialogues with myself at key stages of the research. These took the form of self-interviews, where I would pose reflective questions and respond in writing or orally, allowing different aspects of self to speak. For example:

- *Practitioner Self*: focused on practical strategies, challenges in the classroom
- *Philosophical Self*: explored deeper beliefs about education, power, care
- *Emotional Self*: unpacked personal reactions, vulnerability, burnout

This method offered a way to integrate cognitive insight with emotional truth, allowing for knowledge that might not have emerged through journaling alone. It also allowed for greater complexity, contradiction, and self-awareness to be held within the research process.

Summary of Data Sources

Data Source	Frequency/Scope	Purpose
Reflective Journals	Bi-weekly over 6 months	To capture educator's personal experience, evolving insights, and self-growth
Critical Incident Reflections	Six detailed narrative explorations	To examine emotionally significant teaching moments
Dialogues with Self	At three key stages (early, mid, final)	To deepen reflexivity and integrate multiple inner perspectives

Data Analysis

The data analysis process in this study was informed by the six-phase model of thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006). This hybrid approach allowed me to engage both intuitively and systematically with the rich, introspective data sets mentioned above. In line with heuristic methodology, the emphasis was not on objective detachment, but on deep personal immersion, emotional resonance, and meaning-making through lived experience.

The phases of analysis were as follows:

Phase 1: Familiarisation with the Data

I began by reading and re-reading all the data to immerse myself fully in the tone of the material. This process was both cognitive and emotional, as I paid attention not only to the content but to the feelings and memories that arose. Notes and initial impressions were recorded in the margins of the journals. This phase helped surface the emotional valence of key experiences and laid the foundation for deeper analysis.

Phase 2: Generating Initial Codes

Using a colour-coded system, I manually coded each piece of data line by line. Initial codes captured recurring concepts, emotional states, pedagogical strategies, and philosophical tensions. Examples of early codes included:

- “Emotional fatigue”
- “Bending the rules”
- “Conflict with policy”
- “Recognition of student trauma”
- “Moments of connection”
- “Teacher vulnerability”
- “Growth through discomfort”

These codes were applied inductively, with no pre-set categories, allowing the meanings to emerge organically from the data. This stage was highly flexible, codes were refined, split, or merged as I moved back and forth between data sources.

Phase 3: Searching for Themes

Next, I began organising codes into broader themes that reflected significant patterns of meaning in relation to the research question. This was done using large sheets of paper and mind maps, to visually explore connections between codes. I sought to identify clusters of meaning that reflected deeper insights into how traumainformed practice was shaping my teaching philosophy and professional identity.

At this stage, five tentative themes emerged:

1. Shifting from control to connection
2. Recognising trauma in classroom dynamics
3. Developing emotional attunement
4. Tensions with institutional norms
5. The inner work of teaching

These themes represented both external practice-based shifts and internal personal transformations, capturing the holistic impact of trauma-informed engagement.

Phase 4: Reviewing Themes

Each theme was critically reviewed against the original data to ensure coherence and relevance. I asked:

- Does this theme accurately reflect the core experience being described?
- Are there enough examples to support this theme?
- Are themes distinct from each other, or are they overlapping?

This led to some reorganisation. For instance, the theme initially labelled

"emotional exhaustion" was merged into "the inner work of teaching" because it more accurately described the transformational emotional labour involved in the process. This review process ensured that the themes were grounded in the data and reflective of the core inquiry.

Phase 5: Defining and Naming Themes

Once themes were finalised, I returned to each one to clearly define its essence, not just what was happening, but what it meant. I refined theme titles to be more conceptually rich and aligned them closely with the research question. For each theme, I created a thematic narrative supported by illustrative quotes and reflections.

For example:

- *Theme: "Shifting from Control to Connection"* – Describes the move away from behaviourist models toward a relational, needs-based approach to teaching.
- *Theme: "The Inner Work of Teaching"* – Captures the personal emotional shifts, healing, and identity evolution that occurred alongside pedagogical change.

This phase helped articulate not only what I experienced, but how those experiences transformed my teaching philosophy and professional self-concept.

Phase 6: Writing the Report (Creative Synthesis)

The final phase involved integrating the thematic findings into a coherent narrative within the research article. Here, I blended analytical interpretation with reflective storytelling, honouring the heuristic emphasis on authenticity, resonance, and the emotional dimensions of inquiry.

Rather than presenting findings in an abstracted or depersonalised way, I used firstperson voice and excerpts from my journals and self-dialogues to bring the reader into the lived experience of becoming a trauma-informed educator. Each theme was developed with reference to existing literature, offering points of dialogue between theory and lived reality.

Ethical Considerations

Given the emotionally charged nature of the data, I approached the analysis with care, compassion, and containment. Revisiting certain critical incidents evoked strong emotional reactions, and I employed self-care strategies including pausing analysis when overwhelmed, journaling emotions as they arose, and seeking peer support when needed. Although the data were drawn from my own experience, I remained mindful of student anonymity and ethical sensitivity, ensuring that all references to learners were anonymised to prevent identification.

Constraints and Limitations

As a solo practitioner study rooted in heuristic inquiry, this research embraces subjectivity as both a strength and a limitation. While deep personal engagement enabled rich and meaningful insights, it also introduced the risk of interpretive bias and over-identification with certain themes. These risks were mitigated through ongoing reflexivity and alignment with existing literature to enhance trustworthiness.

Findings, Analysis, and Discussion

Summary of Themes

Theme	Summary
Shifting from Control to Connection	Letting go of authority-driven models to focus on relational trust
The Weight of Emotional Labour	Facing the psychological cost of holding emotional space for others
Pedagogical Reframing	Rethinking success, behaviour, and classroom roles
Navigating Systemic Constraints	Navigating friction between traumainformed practice and FE policy
The Inner Work of Teaching	Recognising my own trauma and transformation through practice

Theme 1: Shifting from Control to Connection

Early in my teaching career, I enforced classroom control through routines, consequences, and structured expectations. Trauma-informed practice called this into question. Trauma-informed practice questions traditional classroom control by reframing student behaviour as meaningful communication rather than wilful disobedience, encouraging educators to respond with empathy and support rather than punishment.

As I began to see students' behaviours through a lens of unmet needs and trauma responses, my focus shifted to safety, attunement, and emotional regulation.

"I used to see eye contact as a sign of attention. Now, I understand that looking away might be a trauma response." (Journal, Feb 2024)

I began using calm voice tones, allowing movement breaks, avoiding public reprimands, and offering "cool down" spaces. These changes deepened relationships, reduced incidents, and redefined my role, not as a manager of behaviour, but as a facilitator of emotional safety.

Theme 2: The Weight of Emotional Labour

The emotional burden of trauma-informed teaching is heavy. I absorbed students' grief, anger, and silence. Some days I left work emotionally exhausted. Without supervision or structured debriefing, this labour often went unacknowledged.

"A student told me about his past with substance abuse and went into more details that I was prepared for. I reached out to a fellow colleague to debrief and share the emotional load." (Critical Incident 2)

I developed coping strategies such as journaling, peer conversations and boundaries around availability. But the emotional toll remains significant, especially in systems that measure performance in grades and attendance, not emotional resilience or connection.

Theme 3: Pedagogical Reframing

Trauma-informed teaching demanded a fundamental rethinking of pedagogy. Learning no longer began with curriculum content but with emotional readiness. I realised that for some students, simply showing up was an act of courage.

"One of the students didn't have their camera on. I didn't know if they were on task or not but when I sent them a direct message on Teams, they were able to show that they had been paying attention for the whole class." (Journal, March 2024)

The question became not "How can I teach this content?" but "How can I meet this learner where they are?" Yet such shifts require cultural change, not just individual innovation.

Theme 4: Navigating Systemic Constraints

As I deepened my trauma-informed practice, I became increasingly aware of the ways institutional structures sometimes struggled to accommodate the flexibility such an approach requires. Policies around attendance, assessment deadlines, and behaviour expectations, though well-intentioned, often reflected a one-size-fits-all framework that didn't always align with the nuanced needs of learners facing adversity.

"This student was always 15 minutes late I then found out it's because they get overwhelmed during rush-hour. Travelling in a full bus or train makes them overwhelmed and it might trigger some past trauma"

(Critical Incident 4)

Moments like this prompted quiet acts of flexibility, extending deadlines, offering alternative forms of engagement, and focusing on relationship-building over compliance. These choices were not about undermining policy but about honouring student dignity in complex circumstances.

Theme 5: The Inner Work of Teaching

Perhaps the deepest transformation occurred internally. As I supported students through trauma, I encountered my own. Feelings of inadequacy, fear, and past emotional wounds surfaced. Trauma-informed practice became a mirror, revealing not just how I teach, but why I teach.

"When she disassociated in class, I recognised something in me too. I have definitely done that too."
(Dialogue with Self, May 2024)

I introduced mindfulness routines into my practice and began to see teaching as a shared journey of healing. This inner work transformed how I saw myself as an educator, shifting from performing to being fully present, from simply delivering content to co-regulating emotions, and from acting as an authority figure to becoming an ally to my students.

Conclusion

This heuristic inquiry traced the personal and professional transformation of adopting trauma-informed teaching within the Scottish FE context. Through sustained reflection, I uncovered how trauma-informed principles reshaped not just my strategies but my very identity as an educator.

This inquiry reaffirmed that trauma-informed teaching is not merely a set of strategies, but a mindset, a moral and relational stance rooted in care, empathy, and responsiveness. Central to this shift was moving from control to connection, letting go of authority-driven models in favour of cultivating relational trust with learners.

At the same time, I became acutely aware of the weight of emotional labour, recognising the psychological cost of holding space for others while navigating my own vulnerabilities. This process demanded a pedagogical reframing, where success, behaviour, and classroom roles were reimagined through a lens of compassion and inclusivity rather than compliance.

Yet, these ideals often collided with systemic constraints, as trauma-informed practice sometimes sat uneasily alongside the policy-driven, performance-focused culture of FE. What emerged most powerfully was the realisation that the inner work of teaching, was inseparable from the outer work of creating safe, inclusive learning spaces. For trauma-informed practice to be truly effective, educators require ongoing support, including targeted training, opportunities for reflection, and recognition of the emotional labour inherent in their work.

Ultimately, this inquiry underscored that trauma-informed education is both deeply personal and profoundly systemic, calling for institutions to move away from punitive, compliance-driven approaches and toward frameworks that centre relationships, compassion, and flexibility.

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