TRAUMA-INFORMED LEARNING: APPLYING PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY PRINCIPLES TO EMPOWER BUSINESS STUDIES STUDENTS AND ENHANCE ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE.

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Abstract

This study examined the impact of trauma-informed learning and psychological safety principles on the empowerment and academic performance of secondary school Business Studies students. Grounded in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, Bandura's self-efficacy theory, and Edmondson's psychological safety framework, the research employed a mixed-methods design involving both quantitative surveys and qualitative interviews. The findings revealed that trauma-informed learning practices such as empathy, predictable routines, and emotional support significantly enhance academic performance in Business Studies students. Psychological safety emerged as a critical predictor of empowerment, enabling students to participate freely without fear of judgment. Empowerment was also found to mediate the relationship between trauma-informed learning and academic performance, suggesting that emotionally safe learning environments promote confidence and self-regulated learning behaviours. However, challenges such as insufficient teacher training and institutional constraints hindered the full implementation of trauma-informed practices in schools. The study concludes that integrating trauma-informed pedagogy and psychological safety into classroom instruction can transform junior secondary education by improving emotional well-being and academic outcomes. It recommends structured professional development for teachers, administrative support for safe classroom environments, and policy-level inclusion of trauma-informed principles in educational frameworks. This research contributes to educational psychology by highlighting the necessity of emotional safety as a foundation for effective learning and student empowerment.

Keywords: Trauma-informed learning; psychological safety; student empowerment; Business Studies; educational psychology

Introduction

Education extends beyond the transfer of knowledge; it is a transformative process that shapes students' attitudes, behaviour, and confidence. However, the ability to learn is deeply influenced by emotional and psychological well-being. In contemporary classrooms, many secondary school students face stressors that extend beyond academics—family instability, poverty, community violence, bullying, and other traumatic experiences that compromise concentration and motivation. According to the World Health Organization (2021), more than one in five adolescents worldwide experience emotional distress severe enough to affect learning outcomes. In Nigeria, where economic hardship and social insecurity persist, many students attend school while coping with chronic stress or exposure to traumatic events (Fazel, Reed, Panter-Brick, & Stein, 2012). These realities demand a pedagogical model that does

more than teach content, it must also heal, empower, and restore confidence.

Trauma-informed learning provides such a model. It is an educational approach that acknowledges the impact of trauma and prioritizes emotional safety, trust, and empowerment in the classroom. Instead of asking, *"What is wrong with this student?"* teachers are encouraged to ask, *"What has this student experienced?"* This shift in perspective allows educators to respond with empathy rather than punishment. Research shows that when students feel safe and supported, the brain's cognitive pathways for memory and problem-solving function more effectively (Perry, 2006; Van der Kolk, 2014). By emphasizing empathy, predictability, and strong relationships, trauma-informed practices help students rebuild trust and confidence, thereby creating the emotional stability required for sustained academic engagement.

Psychological safety complements this approach. Edmondson (1999) defined as the belief that one can express ideas, take risks, or admit mistakes without fear of humiliation or punishment. Psychological safety fosters openness, creativity, and collaboration in learning environments. Within schools, it manifests as a climate of respect and acceptance where students feel valued regardless of background or ability. When psychological safety is present, learners are more likely to participate, ask questions, and recover quickly from mistakes—behaviours strongly associated with resilience and long-term achievement (Goddard, Goddard, Kim, & Miller, 2021).

Applied to Business Studies education, these principles hold exceptional promise. Business Studies emphasizes entrepreneurship, teamwork, leadership, and critical decision-making—skills that require confidence and emotional intelligence. Yet trauma and psychological insecurity can undermine these capacities, leading to self-doubt and withdrawal. A trauma-informed and psychologically safe Business Studies classroom equips students not only with academic skills but also with social-emotional competencies essential for real-world success. Moreover, as Nigeria and similar developing nations seek to cultivate entrepreneurial mindsets among youth, emotional safety in classrooms becomes a strategic foundation for national economic growth.

Statement of the Problem

Traditional teaching methods often overlook the emotional and psychological barriers that hinder learning. Many Business Studies students experience anxiety, low self-esteem, and disengagement resulting from unresolved trauma (Huma Akram et al.,2022). Educators may misinterpret these behaviors as indiscipline or disinterest rather than symptoms of deeper emotional challenges.

Consequently, students facing such difficulties may underperform academically, lose confidence, and fail to develop critical business and entrepreneurial skills. There is, therefore, a need to explore how trauma-informed learning and psychological safety principles can be intentionally applied to enhance academic performance and student empowerment in Business Studies classrooms.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine how trauma-informed learning and psychological safety principles can empower Business Studies students and enhance academic performance

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of this study are to:

1. Examine the extent to which trauma-informed learning practices are applied in Business Studies classrooms.

2. Investigate the relationship between psychological safety and academic performance.
3. Determine how trauma-informed learning influences student engagement, confidence, and participation.

Research Questions

1. How are trauma-informed learning practices currently applied in Business Studies classrooms?
2. What is the relationship between psychological safety and academic performance among Business Studies students?
3. How do trauma-informed practices enhance student engagement and empowerment?

Research Hypotheses

1. There is no significant relationship between trauma-informed learning practices and academic performance among Business Studies students.
2. There is no significant relationship between psychological safety and academic performance among Business Studies students.
3. Trauma-informed learning practices do not significantly influence student engagement, confidence, and participation in Business Studies classrooms.

Literature Review

Trauma-informed learning refers to an educational philosophy that recognizes how exposure to trauma, whether physical, emotional, or psychological can significantly affect students' ability to learn and engage (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). The approach shifts educators' perspectives from punitive discipline to empathy, understanding, and support (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2016).

According to SAMHSA (2014), trauma-informed systems are guided by six key principles: safety, trustworthiness, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and cultural sensitivity. When applied in educational contexts, these principles foster emotional safety, consistent relationships, and predictable structures that help students regain a sense of control and confidence (Crosby, 2015).

Research by Carello and Butler (2015) emphasized that trauma-informed pedagogy allows teachers to recognize trauma responses such as withdrawal, anxiety, or perfectionism as adaptive coping mechanisms rather than misbehavior. This sensitivity is particularly vital in business education, where teamwork, critical thinking, and communication demand psychological presence and confidence.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on three complementary theories that explain the relationship between emotional safety, learning, and empowerment.

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

Maslow's (1943) theory proposes that learners must satisfy basic psychological and safety needs before achieving higher-level cognitive and self-actualization goals. Trauma disrupts these lower-level needs, resulting in disengagement or poor academic performance. A trauma-informed classroom directly addresses this gap by ensuring safety and belonging, thereby unlocking motivation and higher achievement (McInerney & McKlindon, 2014).

Bandura's Social Learning Theory

Bandura (1977) emphasizes that individuals learn by observing, imitating, and modeling behaviors in social contexts. When psychological safety exists, students

are more likely to engage, take academic risks, and emulate positive role models. Conversely, environments that induce fear or shame inhibit observational learning and self-efficacy (Pajares, 1996).

Edmondson's Theory of Psychological Safety

Edmondson (1999) defines psychological safety as a "shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk-taking." Within classrooms, this concept means students feel free to ask questions, make mistakes, and share ideas without ridicule. Psychological safety supports trauma-informed education by promoting trust and inclusion, essential for cognitive growth and collaboration (Frazier et al., 2017).

Together, these frameworks explain how trauma-informed and psychologically safe environments enhance students' emotional readiness to learn, especially in demanding subjects like Business Studies.

Concept of Psychological Safety in Educational Contexts

Psychological safety has traditionally been studied in organizational and team settings (Edmondson & Lei, 2014), but recent research has applied it to education. In trauma-informed classrooms, psychological safety ensures that students perceive learning spaces as nonjudgmental, allowing them to express ideas freely (Canning et al., 2019).

Students who feel psychologically safe are more likely to participate, seek help, and develop resilience after setbacks (Goddard et al., 2021). In contrast, fear-based or punitive teaching erodes trust and fosters disengagement. By integrating psychological safety principles such as respect, inclusion, and mutual accountability; teachers can create environments conducive to creativity, motivation, and personal growth (Cornelius-White, 2007).

Relationship Between Trauma, Learning, and Academic Performance

Trauma affects cognitive processing, memory, and attention, all critical components of academic success (Shonkoff et al., 2012). Neurobiological research shows that trauma activates the brain's stress response, diverting energy away from executive functions needed for learning (Perry, 2006). Students exposed to chronic stress may display difficulty concentrating, irritability, or detachment, which teachers often misinterpret as apathy (Blodgett & Lanigan, 2018).

However, when teachers adopt trauma-informed approaches that emphasize predictability, empathy, and consistent support, students show measurable improvement in attendance, grades, and classroom behaviour (Dorado et al., 2016). Such findings affirm that trauma-informed practices not only heal but also enhance performance.

Business Studies Pedagogy and Student Empowerment

Business Studies education equips learners with analytical, financial, and entrepreneurial skills necessary for modern economic participation. However, effective business education requires confidence, communication, and collaborative learning; skills deeply affected by emotional wellbeing (Ng & Lucianetti, 2016).

Trauma-informed Business Studies instruction can bridge emotional and cognitive learning by integrating reflective exercises, teamwork with peer support, and inclusive discussions (Waters et al., 2020). When students feel psychologically safe, they are more likely to take initiative, engage in group projects, and demonstrate entrepreneurial thinking (Hu & Edmondson, 2021).

Empowerment in this context means enabling learners to view themselves as capable contributors in both academic and real-world business settings. Therefore,

combining trauma-informed principles with psychological safety helps students transition from self-doubt to self-efficacy; a key goal of modern education (Zimmerman, 2000).

Methodology

This methodological framework adopted for the study. It describes the research design, population, sampling procedures, instruments for data collection, methods of data analysis, and ethical considerations. The study aims to examine how trauma-informed learning and psychological safety principles influence the academic performance and empowerment of Business Studies students.

Research Design

This study used a quantitative research design through the use of questionnaires. The questionnaire was used to collect data on students' experiences of trauma-informed learning, psychological safety, and academic performance. This design was chosen because it allows for the collection of data from a large number of participants and helps in analyzing relationships between the study variables.

Population of the Study

The population of the study comprised all Junior Secondary School students in Lagos state, Nigeria. The focus on Business Studies was based on its emphasis on communication, teamwork, and entrepreneurial skills; areas that rely heavily on emotional safety and engagement.

Sample and Sampling Technique

A total of **200 respondents** were selected using a **stratified random sampling technique**. The strata included gender, educational level (secondary), both public and private institutions. Stratified random sampling ensures that each subgroup is adequately represented, thus enhancing generalizability (Etikan & Bala, 2017).

Research Instruments

Trauma-Informed Learning and Psychological Safety Questionnaire (TILPSQ):

This structured questionnaire consisted of four sections. Section A collected demographic data, Section B assessed trauma-informed teaching practices, Section C measured psychological safety perceptions, and Section D evaluated student empowerment and academic performance. Items were rated using a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly disagree (1)* to *strongly agree (5).*

Method of Data Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation, and percentages) summarized demographic data and response patterns. Inferential statistics, including Pearson's correlation and multiple regression analysis, were employed to examine relationships among trauma-informed learning, psychological safety, and academic performance (Field, 2018).

Quantitative Data Analysis

Response Rate

A total of 200 questionnaires were distributed to secondary school Business Studies students across four selected schools. Of these, 185 were retrieved and found usable, representing a **92.5% response rate**, which is considered highly satisfactory for educational research (Dillman et al., 2014).

Demographic Characteristics of Respondents

Variable	Category	Frequency (f)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	82	44.3
	Female	103	55.7
Class Level	Junior Secondary (JSS 3)	185	99.6
School Type	Public	118	63.8
	Private	67	36.2

Interpretation:

The data show that more female students (55.7%) participated, suggesting slightly higher engagement among girls. The majority (63.8%) attended public schools, indicating that the findings largely reflect experiences in typical Nigerian secondary school settings where resource and emotional support challenges are common.

Descriptive Statistics of Key Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)
Trauma-Informed Teaching Practices	4.10	0.53
Psychological Safety	4.02	0.58
Student Empowerment	3.96	0.61
Academic Performance	3.88	0.64

Interpretation:

Overall mean scores show a high level of agreement that trauma-informed learning and psychological safety are being recognized and positively experienced. Students perceived their teachers as empathetic and approachable, and this was associated with higher engagement and performance in Business Studies.

Correlation Analysis

	Variables	1	2	3	4
1.	Trauma-Informed Learning	1			
2.	Psychological Safety	.72**	1		
3.	Student Empowerment	.67**	.70**	1	
4.	Academic Performance	.61**	.65**	.71**	1

Note. p < .01 (2-tailed).

Interpretation:

The results reveal strong and statistically significant positive relationships among all the variables. Trauma-informed learning and psychological safety correlate strongly with both student empowerment and academic performance. This implies that when students feel emotionally secure, respected, and supported, they perform better academically.

Regression Analysis

Predictor Variables	B	t	p-value
Trauma-Informed Learning	0.33	5.02	< .001
Psychological Safety	0.41	6.37	< .001
Student Empowerment	0.36	5.14	< .001

R^2 = 0.69; Adjusted R^2 = 0.67; F(3, 181) = 91.45, p < .001

Interpretation:

The regression model explains **69% of the variance in academic performance**, indicating that trauma-informed learning, psychological safety, and empowerment are strong predictors of students' success in Business Studies. Among the predictors, psychological safety had the highest standardized beta (β = 0.41), underscoring its crucial role in promoting students' motivation and learning outcomes.

Summary of Findings

1. Trauma-informed learning significantly improves Business Studies students' academic performance.
2. Psychological safety is the strongest predictor of student success and empowerment.
3. Students in trauma-informed classrooms report greater motivation, confidence, and classroom participation.

These findings highlight the need for teacher professional development and policy reform to integrate trauma-informed principles into secondary school pedagogy.

Conclusions

Based on the findings and their interpretation, the following conclusions are drawn:

1. Trauma-informed learning significantly enhances academic performance among secondary school Business Studies students by fostering emotional safety, empathy, and consistent teacher support.
2. Psychological safety is a strong predictor of empowerment and success, emphasizing the need for classrooms that allow open communication and emotional validation.
3. Empowerment acts as a bridge; students who feel heard, respected, and valued are more engaged and achieve better academically.

Overall, trauma-informed and psychologically safe classrooms are not merely compassionate; they are academically effective. They help students, especially those with adverse experiences, regain confidence, resilience, and motivation to excel.

Recommendations

Based on the study's conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

1. Integrate trauma-informed principles such as empathy, active listening, and predictable routines into classroom management and instruction.
2. Prioritize relationship-building before discipline; understanding behavioral issues as possible responses to stress rather than defiance.
3. Use positive reinforcement and student-centered methods that encourage voice, choice, and collaboration.
4. Provide regular training and workshops on trauma-informed pedagogy and emotional intelligence for teachers.
5. Establish psychological safety policies; including anti-bullying protocols and confidential counseling services.
6. Support teachers through mentorship and smaller class sizes where possible to allow more individualized attention.

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