

# **A Systematic Review of Trauma-Informed Certificate Programs**

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**Abstract:** Heightened awareness of the impacts of trauma and early life adversities has created a greater interest in the broader applications of trauma-informed practice. Trauma-informed practices in professional and educational organizations are increasingly seen as a critical aspect of equitable learning, creating a need for quality educational certificate programs. In this paper, we present findings from a systematic review of six graduate trauma-informed certificate programs that offered curricula designed for broad audiences. We illustrate how their curricula align and represent a comprehensive and holistic curriculum.

*Keywords:* Trauma-Informed, Graduate Education, Systematic Review

Trauma-informed practices in professional and educational organizations are progressively seen as a critical aspect of equitable learning, creating a need for quality educational certificate programs. Navigating through the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic calls for trauma-informed graduate and professional development that utilizes a holistic approach. For this paper, we adopted the definition of holistic to denote “relating to or concerned with complete systems rather than with individual parts” (The Britannica Dictionary, n.d.). By holistic, we mean programs using a human-centered approach that addresses the needs of people throughout all aspects of their lives: personal, education, work, and beyond. From our standpoint, such a focus addresses the needs and worth of all people to foster resilience and well-being and promotes inclusion, justice, and belonging.

We share the results of a systematic review focusing on graduate certificate programs emphasizing trauma-informed education. Our study examines the alignment of their curricula and assesses the extent to which these programs offer comprehensive and holistic approaches to trauma-informed practices. Our goal was to critically evaluate the curriculum content to identify programs that effectively address the needs of learners, leaders, and organizations in a holistic manner.

## **Background**

Trauma awareness has significantly increased over the last 25 years, beginning with the seminal study conducted by Feletti et al. (1998) about Adverse Childhood Experiences. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, an estimated 50%-90% of people had experienced trauma in the United States (Brion, 2020; Donisch et al., 2016; Gray & Litz, 2005). Trauma and early life adversity increase a person’s susceptibility to adverse life outcomes and account for the second highest predictor of academic failure (Stevens, 2012; West et al., 2014). The increased awareness of the impacts of trauma and early life adversity has created a greater interest in the broader applications of trauma-informed practice. As the demands for professional development in trauma-informed practice increase, so do professional development and training opportunities.

Trauma-informed instruction is increasingly considered the key to creating equitable classrooms focusing on learner well-being (Marquart & Cresswell Báez, 2021). Evidence and research-based education and training programs are crucial for empowering professionals to

confidently implement, teach, and lead in trauma-informed ways (Alisic, 2012; Ko et al., 2008). Earning a graduate certificate is a cost and time-effective way for professionals and practitioners to gain expertise in a specialized knowledge area (Murray et al., 2011). However, the literature illustrates inconsistent approaches to professional development and education regarding trauma-informed practice (Donisch et al., 2016). Investigation into trauma-informed professional development and education is necessary to understand the commonalities and inconsistencies in these programmatic offerings. A systematic review and analysis of certificate programs in this emerging field supports programmatic improvement and innovation and can provide a blueprint for new program development. Reviewing these programs is essential to the long-term success of trauma-informed adult education.

### **Methodology**

We applied an analytic, systematic review framework to this project. While such an approach is typically utilized to conduct literature reviews, we believe it is well-suited to analyze trauma-informed certificate programs. According to Russell et al. (2009), a “systematic review is a protocol-driven comprehensive review and synthesis of data focusing on a topic or related key questions” (p. 5). A systematic review utilizes a highly methodical approach that limits and reduces researcher bias (Crowther et al., 2010). Our protocol followed these steps: (a) research question; (b) preliminary search/preidentified source; (c) inclusion/exclusion criteria; (d) preliminary screening; (e) refine inclusion criteria; (f) screen course descriptions; (g) code and compare course offerings; and (h) synthesize findings.

### **Data Collection and Screening**

The project team identified 29 trauma-informed professional and graduate certificates for the initial review. The Resilient Educator (n.d.) website served as a resource for locating institutions offering certificate programs, where we identified 21 programs in higher education institutions offering graduate and professional trauma-informed certificate programs. Three institutions offered more than one program, resulting in 24 certificate programs for review. We found four additional programs via Google and one final program via word of mouth that did not appear on the Resilient Educator (n.d.) website or web search.

Initial inclusion criteria for the systematic review were (a) professional, graduate, and post-graduate certification programs; (b) programs offering teacher professional development credits; (c) comprehensive, multi-course, or multi-module programs; (d) online (synchronous and asynchronous), on-campus, or mixed delivery methods; and (e) generalist or multidisciplinary programs. During preliminary screening, we discovered that graduate and professional certificate programs significantly differed. Traditionally, certifications are obtained upon completing training, leading to acquiring a professional credential. Conversely, a graduate certificate is an academic certificate recorded on a transcript provided by an accredited higher education institution (Research Graduate Certificate Programs (n.d.)). In our preliminary screening of the curricula, we found that the program structure, content, and delivery of professional certifications differed significantly from the graduate certificates, which prompted us to limit the scope of the review. Therefore, we removed professional certificates and programs centered on professional development credits for educators from the inclusion criteria. Refining the inclusion criteria resulted in the removal of eight professional and continuing education programs. Additionally, three undergraduate certificates and two master’s degree programs were removed for not meeting

inclusion criteria, resulting in 16 certificate programs in the review. Because we were looking for generalist programs, we screened out discipline-specific curricula and removed programs in psychology, education and special education, clinical practice, and social work. From the eight graduate certificate programs remaining, we removed two due to institutional mergers and closures. Of the six programs that met the final inclusion criteria, five were listed on the Resilient Educator (n.d.) website, and one was the result of a Google search.

**Data Analysis**

We analyzed the graduate certificate program content areas using open-coding, or an initial coding approach that “breaks down qualitative data into discrete parts, closely examines them, and compares them for similarities and differences” (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, as cited in *Saldaña*, 2016, p 115). Initial codes were derived from course titles and descriptions when available. The course offerings resulted in thirty unique codes that we classified into eight corresponding content areas. Content areas include (a) mental health and therapy; (b) education; (c) JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion); (d) social work; (f) organizations and leadership; (g) foundational; (h) resilience and well-being; and (i) other. Codes that only appeared once were classified as “other.” At first, we included core courses and electives in the analysis; then, we removed the electives because our goal was to better understand the *unifying* or *core elements* of certificate programs. After removing elective course codes, 20 codes remained in six content areas. Figure 1 details the final list of codes and corresponding content areas.

**Figure 1**  
*Codes & Corresponding Content Areas*

Corresponding Content Areas						
	Mental Health & Therapy	JEDI	Organizations & Leadership	Foundational	Resilience & Well-being	Other
Codes	TI-CBT	Race & Trauma	TI Leadership	Neuro/Brain	Self-Care	TI Special Topics
	Mental Health	Trauma & Social Justice	TI Organizations	Intro Traumatology/ TI-Care	Resilience	Trauma Research
		Cultural Perspectives & Learning	Professionalism	TIC – Best Practice	Grief & Loss	TI Schools
		Disability		Trauma & Stress		Ethics
						SW/Social Welfare

**Findings**

Through this systematic review of trauma-informed graduate certificates, we aimed to understand common elements of curricula in programs that appeal to a broad audience. A preliminary review of these programs revealed three central understandings best captured by the following U2 lyrics: 1) “But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for” (U2, 1987a), 2) “We’re one, but we’re not the same” (U2, 1991), and 3) “You give it all, but I want more” (U2, 1987b).

“But I still haven’t found what I’m looking for” (U2, 1987a). Although program descriptions

list applicable professions for their curriculum, the content focuses primarily on clinical practice, social work, or working with children and adolescents. Outside of using the word “community” to discuss the broader application of trauma-informed practice, we did not explicitly see a more comprehensive discussion of how to engage in trauma-informed practice across the lifespan.

**“We’re one, but we’re not the same”** (U2, 1991). Programs included in the corresponding content area appeared to have the broadest applications, making it challenging to determine the universal components of a generalist program. Two-thirds of programs offered courses in what was deemed a foundational curriculum, and only one of the six programs had representation in five of the six corresponding content areas. Finally, the only area representing all six programs was “other,” signaling that the only consistency across curriculums is that the courses cannot easily be categorized. Interestingly, the program with representation in the most corresponding content areas was not listed on the Resilient Educator (n.d.) website.

**“You give it all, but I want more”** (U2, 1987b). While analyzing the course offerings, we assigned 20 codes corresponding to core curricula covered in the six certificate programs. The 20 codes resembled general course topics and did not relate directly to a single course title. Yet, with the wide variety of courses offered, we did not locate a universal content area among the core courses. Moreover, more diverse course offerings were found in the electives but not included in this review. Courses offered as electives were better aligned with our definition of holistic courses, indicating that holistic aspects of the curricula often live in optional spaces.

## Discussion

This paper presented findings from a systematic review of six trauma-informed graduate certificate programs. This project aimed to find ways, if any, the program curricula aligned and how the course offerings contribute to a holistic certificate program. Instead of finding a broadly applicable holistic program, we generally found course offerings were either 1) not truly generalist or 2) varied so considerably from program to program that it was difficult to identify a core curriculum. When developing new disciplines, instructors are often at the forefront of defining the curricula; therefore, standardization of knowledge, particularly in an emerging area, is steeped in the practices of a limited number of institutions (Zadravec & Kočar, 2023). Programmatic inconsistencies led us to a new problem: the lack of a governing or regulatory body that guides generalist trauma-informed educational programs in higher education. This new problem leads us to ask: (a) who determines the standards, and what should those standards be; (b) how to determine expertise in the discipline of trauma-informed practice; and (c) who should be the regulating body? While the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration was vital in coordinating the Interagency Task Force on Trauma-Informed Care, it is unclear how that work informed curricula in trauma-informed higher education programs (SAMHSA, n.d.).

The next research steps include examining program descriptions, goals, and learning outcomes using instructional design frameworks such as ADDIE (Analyze, Design, Develop, Implement, Evaluate) (Branson et al., 1975), Bloom’s Taxonomy (Bloom et al., 1956), Gagné’s Nine Events of Instruction (Gagné, 1985), and Merrill’s Principles (Merrill, 1994). Completing an in-depth analysis of learning goals and outcomes supports our aim of creating a blueprint for programmatic development in the emerging discipline of trauma-informed practice.

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