A critical perspective on the use of the trauma narrative in American schools

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Abstract

This chapter aims to caution educators to critically examine and identify discursive gaps in the national, school practitioner dialogue on the relationship between trauma and school discipline in the United States. Over 74% of American schools experience at least one violent criminal act each year and an estimated 8% of all teachers experience some form of threatening behavior from their students (Robers et. al., 2012). Those of us who work closely with schools on this issue can attest that schools in high violence communities can experience teacher threats, harassment, and violence at rates four times the national percentage. Also, while homicides in schools are not a prominent issue, studies suggest that an average of 20% of students surveyed report a gang presence on their campus. The author suggests these realities of institutional toxicity are largely ignored in both conservative and leftist discourses of school discipline practice as youth and communities are pathologized as inherently deficient and in need of reform. This chapter suggests there are clear gaps in the trauma discourse that are embedded in three underlying assumptions. These assumptions represent and construct a dynamic of pathologization within the current U.S. narrative of trauma in education. They are as follows: (1) A Monolithic Manifestation of Trauma; (2) Schools as the Safe Places in the community; and (3) Communities as powerless spaces of victimization.

Introduction

As a consultant to many educational institutions in the United States, I have had numerous opportunities to sit with teachers and administrators in staff meetings as they have struggled to figure out key questions concerning students that have low-income backgrounds: "why do our students seem so out of control?" or "how do we address the discipline issues of our school?". Invariably, especially if the school has low income students or students of color, the conversation has included some reference to student poverty and trauma. This paper aims to advance three points of caution for educators who invest

in a trauma narrative to explain why students – particularly those from historically marginalized communities – struggle to exhibit behaviors that comply with social norms or passively acquiesce to broader school expectations.

Research confirms that violence, parental abuse, and neglect are not exclusive to low-income communities or communities of color. In the United States, according to the The National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 25% of all children in the U.S. will experience at least one traumatic event before they reach the age of 16 (2008). In the United States, as many as 70% of adults (approximately 223.4 million) in the U.S. have experienced some type of traumatic event at least once in their lives according to the organization PTSD United (2013).

Problematizing the 'trauma lens'

The use of trauma as a way of framing the challenges that students experience in school did not come out of nowhere. What Cole et al., (2013) have referred to as the "Trauma Lens" emerged from a growing recognition of how researchers suggest emotional, neurological, and behavioral responses to traumatic events impact student engagement and conduct in school. The authors go on to explain:

> These studies from public health experts, neurobiologists, and psychologists can lead to greater empathy and a shift in perception about what may underlie the challenges certain students face at school. This knowledge provides a new lens – what we call the Trauma Lens – through which students and their learning, behavior, and relationships can be seen and understood (Cole et al., 2013, p. 7).

While the trauma lens evokes a consideration of the long history of racism and implicit bias in the United States, it fails to inspire a reflection upon the ways in which well-meaning educators can perpetuate stereotypes of pathology and inferiority as they seek to diagnose populations that struggle to demonstrate high levels of institutional success. This is not to say that the adoption of such a lens indicates any malicious intent. In fact, theorists have noted that the short sightedness of white liberal frameworks – absent of deep reflexivity – can lead to outcomes that constitute "democratic racism" – an unintentional manifestation of racial bias in the face of an effort to produce the exact opposite. Henry and Tator write, "In conflict with these liberal values, a second set of attitudes and behaviours includes negative feelings about people of color that carry the potential for discrimination (1994, p. 1)." I argue, that if allowed to go unexamined, the Trauma Lens can serve as a vessel through which attitudes and behaviors regarding historically marginalized groups can be cloaked in a loosely articulated framework of "concern" for the traumatized.

Pathologization

Pathologization is to regard or treat someone as psychologically unusual or unhealthy. As educators work in haste to implement trauma-safe practices and create trauma-aware environments, they often overlook the realities that large percentages of Americans have experienced trauma – not just the students. Furthermore, trauma is a phenomenon that exists across all social locations and can vary in its manifestation by the individual affected (Arvidson et al., 2011; Finkelhor, Ormrod & Turner, 2007; Osofsky, 2004, 1995). To focus a trauma discourse on particular families and children based on income or difficulty in school ignores the realities and literature on trauma and its impact on daily life. Such a focus also constitutes a pathologization of the community that may center as the root concern for a community of educators. On the political left and right alike, focus on communities of color and the struggles that they face has traditionally been damage-centered as educators fell into a legacy of representing historically targeted neighborhoods and tribes as damaged and broken in some way (Tuck, 2009; Valencia, 2010). These deficit-oriented depictions have emerged with reports on trauma in educational contexts, especially in high poverty and low-income communities of color (Shields, Bishop & Mazawi, 2005). Furthermore, the Trauma Lens and the resulting discourse has largely excluded the challenges presented by an ever present dynamic of cultural incongruence between public school teachers and students that has proved problematic in America's highly racialized cultural climate (Duncan-Andrade, 2007; Goldenberg, 2013; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Landsman & Lewis, 2006).

In this chapter, I present three key points of critique around the popular inclusion of trauma into the current national discourse on educational equity and school discipline. I argue that there are clear gaps in this discourse embedded in three underlying assumptions. These assumptions represent and construct a dynamic of pathologization within the current U.S. narrative of trauma in education. They are as follows: (1) A Monolithic Manifestation of Trauma; (2) Schools as the Safe Places in the community; and (3) Communities as powerless spaces of victimization.

A monolithic manifestation of trauma

According to the literature, each individual experiences trauma and thus manifests responses and coping mechanisms in different ways. A broad lack of nuanced understanding regarding community trauma, acute trauma, vicarious trauma, complex trauma, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), persistent stress disorder, and other classifications of trauma leave educators in a position in which they blindly ascribe psychological dysfunction to entire populations without any significant steps to analyze actual circumstances. In essence, there exists a confusion among educators between the various types of trauma and the individualized ways that one might experience trauma that transfers into an uninformed, projected notion of "mass trauma" onto a community (Marlowe, 2009; Pupavac, 2002).

In addition to the glossing over of the individually nuanced ways in which different types of trauma may impact different people, there is a broad reach as to the impact such experiences will manifest in a school context. Researchers discuss at length the various

ways in which students at different levels in their development "*can*" be distracted from school activities or hindered in their capacity to concentrate or participate in routine student responsibilities due to their trauma (Mann, Kristjansson, Sigfusdottir & Smith, 2014; National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, 2010; Schwerdtfeger, Gallus, Shreffler, Merten & Cox Jr., 2015). Research has also shown that many students who experience traumatic incidents demonstrate high levels of resiliency and the development of coping mechanisms that lead to them to access resources and support (DuMont, Widom & Czaja, 2007; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas & Taylor, 2007).

The trauma discourse also contends that, students may have issues with trusting others after experiencing trauma but one should question who specifically they have mistrust–all adults, teachers, gang leaders, friends, or otherwise? I have seen children who have refused to trust a teacher but instead place a very high level of confidence and faith in a sibling, relative, or family friend. All relationships require a period of trust building and I wonder if some teachers use the discourse of trauma to explain what might, in many cases, be a slower process of trust development that is more a reflection of their relational distance than a result of a psychological disorder. It is also important to note that younger children and the effects of trauma maybe easier to discern than older students as they develop various coping mechanisms and relational strategies to function during adolescence (Rolnick, 2010). Certain manifestations of trauma may not develop until later on in a person's development and students with histories of compliant and accommodating behavior may encounter disciplinary problems later on (Petersen, Joseph & Feit, 2014).

I have also witnessed classroom and school settings in which the narrative regarding students was one of trauma and victimization when explaining low attention spans, constant physical movement, yelling out of turn, and other "disruptive" behaviors. In many of these spaces, I have also noted a lack of clarity and consistency on the part of educators to build mutual understanding of boundaries or guidelines while often providing lackluster instructional presence or material for the class. Hence, the "diagnosis" of trauma replaced a more student-centered relational approach to understanding student behavior.

I recall visiting an elementary school in the San Francisco Bay Area of California and sitting with the principal late in my visit. Before I even asked a question she was preemptively explaining how traumatized the kids were and how poor performing the school was before she had arrived. Before I sat with her, I had toured the school and got a glimpse of what my tour-guide explained was a normal day. During my time there, I witnessed a student no older than 4th grade throwing a tantrum in the hallway. It was during classes and the rest of the school was in their rooms. In the long corridor you could hear the child's screams of frustration and sadness as he screamed for access to a classroom from which he was removed. Falling on the floor in this old school building with vaulted hallway ceilings of 14 feet or more was a little blonde-haired, raging, crying child. His crying could be heard from the floor below setting a scene that would eerily mimic a psychiatric ward from a century ago. He was banging on a classroom door – his classroom, and drawing on it furiously with a crayon so that the scribbles could be seen from 20 feet away. One staff person, a large Black man was sitting in a chair no more than 10 feet from him trying to talk him down. He asked the child to come with him so that he could go to the office but the child crying screamed, "I don't want to go with you!!!". This went on for at least 20 minutes.

At one point, the principal was visiting classrooms and went into one where a boy was locked out (passing the crying child on the way in). As she came out a few minutes later, she asked the child what was wrong. After a short reply, she told the child that he would have to go to her office. He continued to cry and scream, and she walked away to another class. I asked my tour guide, a veteran teacher there, about what the policy was for locking children out of class. She said "there isn't one" – different teachers do what they choose." She then informed me that this student had a history of hitting other students and has a special needs classification which makes certain teachers feel uncomfortable with him in the room. I asked her about the training they had received in classroom management, conflict resolution, child development, staff communication and safety procedures. Her answer: "None".

Again, when I sat down later with the principal, she told me about how her student population was a struggling population with low performance and behavioral problems. I'd be hard pressed to attribute that to trauma based on what I saw on a normal day at that school. Which leads me to my next point…

Schools as 'safe places' in the community

The ongoing discourse about individual and community trauma removes the possible investigation of school as a traumatizing institution that employs educators who are unable to protect or develop healthy human beings. In her work on survival-centered appraisal of trauma, Gilfus writes "A trauma reference can draw attention away from the real source of the problem – the individual and collective perpetrators of the violence (1999)." Even in cases where educators express a commitment to providing a safe environment for students, the notion of the school itself as the PRIMARY space of victimization often goes unacknowledged.

Research shows that schools can be unsafe spaces. In the "Indicators of School Crime and Safety" report (2012), Robers et al., stated "students ages 12–18 were victims of about 1,364,900 nonfatal victimizations at school, including 615,600 thefts and 749,200 violent victimizations, 89,000 of which were serious violent victimizations" (p. iv). Not all of these "victimizations" are necessarily crimes that would be reported to local law enforcement but are important as they suggest the enactment of a behavior or action that situates a student or staff person as a victim of emotional, psychological, or physical harm. The same national report completed in 2010 discussed the prevalence of student crime reporting that in the 2009–10 school year an estimated 1.9 million crimes had been reported by public schools in the U.S. with 85% of public schools reporting at least one crime, on or off campus, serious enough to report to the police. Additionally, the same study revealed that 60% of public schools reported on – campus crime incidents to the police, "amounting to 689,000 crimes – or 15 crimes per 1,000 public school students enrolled" in the United States (p. v., 2012).

Over 74% of American schools experience at least one violent criminal act each year and an estimated 8% of all teachers experience some form of threatening behavior from their students (Robers et al., 2012). Those of us who work closely with schools on this issue can attest that schools in high violence communities that have not experienced success in

these issues could experience teacher threats, harassment, and violence at rates four times greater than the national percentage. Also, while homicides in schools are not a prominent issue, studies suggest that an average of 20% of students surveyed report a gang presence on their campus.

This is not to mention the persistent school experience of bullying, of which nearly a third of students ages 12–18 experience each year (Robers et al., 2012). So much had been made of the pervasive impact of bullying on the lives of youth that between 1999 and 2010 alone over 120 bills were enacted by legislators to nationally address the issue in schools (Stuart-Cassell et al., 2011). Moreover, there's also the ongoing issue of sexual harassment in schools that occurs both on campus and online. Nearly half of American students report seeing or experiencing some form of sexual harassment in schools and research has shown that such incidents often go severely underreported (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Mumford et al., 2013). This underreporting includes a disproportionately high level of harassment and assault experienced by sexual minority students as two-thirds experience such incidents at school (Bishop & Casida, 2011). Research also shows such occurrences can lead to students losing sleep, talking less in class, having difficulty paying attention, and avoiding school altogether (Hill & Kearl, 2011; Lichty, et. al., 2008). Also, girls report being impacted by harassment more than boys and students' attitudes towards these incidents tends to be nonchalant (Hill & Kearl, 2011).

What is also disturbing is the institutional inconsistency in terms of resources and time allotted in school districts and pre-service training programs to provide a system of preparation and support structures to sufficiently address violence, bullying, and harassment in schools (Charmaraman, et. al., 2012). This inconsistency highlights a juxtaposition of contrasting realities in school as a collection of professionals, preoccupied with addressing student trauma while simultaneously creating and/or allowing it.

The aforementioned issue of branding an entire community as traumatized illuminates yet another gap that appears to be obvious to many of us that matriculated through America's public school system; that schools are in fact more violent than many communities. Specifically, students in the United States have a higher rate of victimization in schools than they do outside of schools. According to researchers, students' records demonstrated nationally a rate of 52 victimizations per 1,000 students at school, and 38 victimizations per 1,000 students occurring away from school (Robers et al., 2013). As educators work to identify trauma that has occurred in impoverished "troubled" communities, they simultaneously neglect to identify the critical role that schools have played in traumatizing the communities.

The community only as 'abuser'

The Family Stress model (McCubbin & Patterson, 1982) ABC-X represents the way in which families adapt to crisis as a mechanism of survival. The presence of a stressor event leads to a response that is based on how the stressor is perceived by those it impacts and the resources that are available to the family to help them deal with the event. Depending on the capacity of the family it is influenced by the components of perception and resources, the stressor can either be handled well or may develop into a crisis. To summarize, as the

situation develops into a crisis, the way in which resources and perceptions are employed to cope with the issue can lead to one of two forms of adaptation – *maladaptation* or *bonadaptation*. Whereas maladaptation does not lead to a long term resolution or result in the effective handling of the crisis, bonadaptation results from a beneficial combination of perception and resources in a reflective and analytical framing of the situation to produce a successful solution to the issue.

Such a process is not unique to a particular race or class but rather the analysis of how families address stressors. A discourse of student and family trauma that ignores their own current and historical ability to adapt and develop resiliency is one that pathologizes particular communities as unusually helpless and vulnerable (DuMont, Widom & Czaja, 2007; Jaffee, Caspi, Moffitt, Polo-Tomas & Taylor, 2007). The discourse inevitably leads to a construction of a "diminished subject" that becomes embedded in policy development that leads to poorly implemented educational initiatives aimed at "saving"' communities rather than building alliances. As stated by bell hooks:

> "Rather, here I am concerned with research that happens much more surreptitiously, research that invites oppressed peoples to speak but to «only speak from that space in the margin that is a sign of deprivation, a wound, an unfulfilled longing. Only speak your pain» (Hooks, 1990, p. 152)."

Researchers have examined a parallel dynamic in two relational spaces. In the examination of the labeling of refugee communities, researchers have noted a pathologization of communities as traumatized and uniquely deficient in ways that other communities are not assumed to be traumatized or otherwise (Marlowe, 2010; Pupavac, 2002). Other researchers have focused their attention on what they label as the "emotionalizing" of schooling (Ecclestone, 2011; Ecclestone & Hayes, 2009) and the associated political and programmatic dynamics that inspire changes in educational policy and practice as a result (Ecclestone, 2004; Shields, 2010). Among other things, such policies and practices lead to the development of school-based agendas that seek to insert psychotherapeutic constructs and practices into educational spaces as interventions to poor student behavior and performance.

One problem inherent in these efforts is what Vanessa Pupavac calls the "interruptive capacity of the psychosocial intervention" which argues that there is an assumption that there are no coping mechanisms of useful beneficial qualities or skillsets in the community to challenge the proliferation of the damaging effects of trauma (Pupavac, 2002). This assumption opens the door for the proliferation of non-government agencies and state institutions to enter communities as both the framers and problem-solvers of what is assumed to be a collective psychosis. This shaping of the narrative regarding working-class experiences with trauma and oppression speaks to the inherent classism in the current educational discourse. What is mostly a discussion about misbehavior, and the perceived threatening disposition of low-income students of color has been cloaked in a discussion feigning concern for the emotional, psychological, and physical well-being of students. The emphasis on urban schools and schools with high populations of students of color is an indicator of the inherent bias within the discourses of educational policy and practice. Researchers have noted the presence of depression and anxiety in upper and middle-class students in the united states (Koplewicz, Gurian & Williams, 2009; Luthar & Barkin,

2012). In fact, students from higher income families tend to exhibit higher levels of alcohol and hard drug use than "inner-city" youth (Trim & Chassin, 2015). Studies have also revealed that suburban girls suffer from "clinically significant levels of depression" at a rate three times higher than normative samples (Luthar & Latendresse, 2005).

In educator circles, socio-economic class can often be discussed as the "source" or "cause" of the stressors and the assumption of trauma. In the education of the working-class, the discussion leans heavily on presumptions about neighborhood violence and what students go through on a daily basis as a result. In this way, the family, community, and – in more leftist circles – systematic oppression can serve as the focal points for change – and thus intervention. However, if our primary, authentic concern is the well-being of students, we also have to acknowledge the aforementioned realities of the high levels of anxiety, depression and substance abuse in more privileged families. In these discussions, the potential sources may not include systematic oppression or neighborhood violence in the way these terms are typically operationalized, but other formations of these concepts and additional sources of potential causality emerge.

Furthermore, avoiding the reality of the role that schools, upper-class parents, and universities play in the harming of youth calls into question the use of high stakes assessments, Advanced Placement workloads, and other core components of our competitive K–12 culture that are suspiciously absent from the discourse of trauma and student well-being.

Researchers have noted that adolescent stress and anxiety that may lead to self-medication through substance abuse comes from parental and academic pressure (Leonard, et. al., 2015; Luthar, Barkin & Crossman, 2013; Olivas & Li, 2006). Such research sheds light on the power of chronic stress and broadens the framework of what can often be very narrow discussions of student trauma. For example, studies have suggested that the pursuits of academic excellence and the stress associated with college admissions can drive families and students to elevated levels of pressure with which students find difficult to cope with (DeBerard, Spielmans & Julka, 2004; Read et al., 2012; Saklofske, et. al., 2012).

Such realities – when discussed openly – could likely lead to indictments of upper-class parents, educators at high-performing K–12 institutions, and prestigious universities as problematic players in the trauma discourse. Acknowledgement of the role these entities play in student well-being, potentially constructs the very institutions implementing policies to address student trauma as critical causes and perpetuators of the very issues they proclaim to target.

Socialized defensive behaviors historically serve as markers of pride and authenticity among working-class populations as people practice hypervigilance around issues of respect, focusing on body language, movement, personal space, and verbal interactions (Norwood, 2002; Roediger, 1999; Wise, 2010). While for many that are not aware of these common human markers of inclusion, loud talk and short tempers, may be signs of poor self-control; given the realities of what happens in schools and the obvious lack of preparation or awareness within the educator population, I see these traits as potential enactments of necessary traits for self-defense that one might learn as a response to the realities being unprotected in American schools.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

Educators, communities, and politicians have tried to address issues of school climate and safety by implementing school policies that either enact *zero tolerance* measures for student transgressions or by softening existing boundaries to reduce suspensions in deference to supposedly victimized communities. What neither of these approaches do is address the core inadequacies that exist within schooling regarding the empowerment and liberation of working-class communities and communities of color. To clarify, the establishment of rigid boundaries without clear communication cultural congruence and agreement by community members should undergo the same suspicion as the relaxing of boundaries. One might find that when looking through a lens of clear communication cultural congruence and community agreement that the relaxing of behavioral boundaries encodes for temporary exclusion share a similar ideological ambiguity with the measures propose by the more conservative and punitive politic.

If it is accurate that students are bringing in destructive behaviors that manifest parasitic ideologies and patterns of interaction, the question for schools is how do they structure their educational content and behavioral codes to set standards that are more reflective of the community's ethics and needs. Without the effort to establish such standards or even the effort to inquire on which such standards would be, decades of ineffective action in this area could create an environment in which adults, either through fear or low expectations, sanction such destructive ideology and behaviors among students through either improper action or no action at all.

I recall during my time as a school principal, I observed students using language and enacting behavior against each other and adults that I knew was not acceptable either in their home or on the very city streets that they would hang out in. For those who are not familiar with American cities, it is important to understand that if you are a resident of an urban municipality with a history of political social and economic targeting of various working-class communities, you have had the experience of walking through neighborhoods and streets with fairly clear spoken and unspoken "rules". These rules may involve issues of where one can and cannot walk, how one must dress, what one might do when greeting particular individuals of particular status in the community, etc. When one comes into a school environment where such boundaries do not exist or the ways in which consequences for transgressions are given out is experienced as inconsistent and unreasonable, the boundaries of the school building become less clear, less safe, and thus less respected.

In conclusion

Trauma is an ever-present phenomenon in a violent social world. It can impact how we think, learn, live, and move in our world. It is important for educators that are committed to humanization and the development of more critical approaches to schooling proceed with caution when crafting and utilizing a trauma lens in their work. The experience of social, economic, physical, and psycho-emotional targeting should not leave one open to pathologization for the sake of alliance with those of more privileged status. As we authentically seek to establish a higher sense of collective awareness of how trauma can negatively

impact the daily enactment of our lives, we must also remember the ways in which individuals and communities can sustain habits and attitudes of resilience and resistance. Resiliency is not just a term to describe the enduring of difficult circumstances or suffering, but rather a community's capacity to excel and humanize itself in the face of systemic and interrelational manifestations of oppression. As critical educators seek to work *with* students and their families as opposed to *on* them, historically marginalized populations must be understood as collectives of a diverse array of human beings that engage with, and are set upon by a variety of institutions in a myriad of ways. Such communities have developed their own forms of coping with and resisting the negative impacts of such entities – some of which can appear foreign to educators unfamiliar with their struggles. Before we categorize student behavior as a result of a psychological issue, we must first reflect on the realities of our educational institutions and the ways in which we as educators work in spaces that can often operate in opposition to the communities we serve. I suggest this, not so that we can be more "sensitive", but so we might truly see our students and families as we might see ourselves – as capable, as strong, as human.

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