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The Importance of Narrative: Moving Towards Sociocultural Understandings of Trauma-Informed Praxis

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The Importance of Narrative: Moving Towards Sociocultural Understandings of Trauma-Informed Praxis

Noah Asher Golden

When asked what it meant to her that her educational program was trauma-informed, Violet, age 20, responded, “It means that just here [the teachers] are prepared for, like, when someone is suicidal or, like, going into problems.” Her peer, Carlos, also 20, chimed in, “Or child abuse or... these teachers here are trained for that.” When asked to elaborate, Violet explained that each student in the program “has a story but some stories are way deeper than others.” Carlos said that everyone “is here at Huerta [nickname for their school] for a reason... they ditched school for a reason... there’s something behind that. Whereas other schools don’t see that.” Later in this focus group conversation, Violet said, “Here they hear both sides of the story, and over there [her old school], it was like, ‘no, you’re a bad kid, no.’”

“Trauma-informed” seems to be the latest educational buzzword for politicians, policymakers, administrators, teacher educators, and teachers. This newfound attention is perhaps a reaction to decades of policy and practice grounding formal education in cognitive learning targets and standards-aligned skills. Realizing that social and emotional dimensions have long been ignored, there is now, finally, attention paid to broader conceptions of young people’s lived experience. But how does this work understand trauma and the role of pedagogy in mitigating it? What are the affordances and limitations of different framings of trauma-informed pedagogy, and how might teachers’ pedagogies respond to young people’s stories and experiences?

While the goals of programs grounded in such a model are clearly well-intentioned, there are reasons to view this dominant framing of trauma-informed pedagogy with a critical eye. In this article, I review the rationale for the dominant framing of trauma-informed pedagogy and critique the approach with knowledge generated from a study in which I am observing trauma-informed practice and interviewing small groups of adolescent scholars to discuss their lives and learning experiences. I argue that trauma-informed pedagogy cannot be reduced to a fixed approach grounded solely in a biomedical understanding of trauma, but must be related to environmental and systemic factors and value the meaning-making processes of the youth. I conclude with considerations for researchers investigating these growing pedagogical practices and thoughts for educators seeking to implement trauma-informed approaches to teaching and learning.

Trauma-Informed Pedagogy

The dominant framing of trauma-informed pedagogy uses a reductive biomedical model that suggests that trauma is the locus of unequal outcomes. Trauma can “include both large-scale, collectively felt events... and small-scale, personal experiences—of loss, violence, displacement, and oppression” (Dutro, 2017, p. 327). According to one measure, 40 percent of students in the United States experience trauma (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2014, as cited in Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015a). Trauma, though, is often reduced to the physiological. Whether causes are emotional, physical, or environmental, it is understood to lead to physiological responses (e.g., “traumatic stress” or “toxic stress”), and can engender a “fight or flight” mindset that interrupts the learning process (Shonkoff & Garner, 2012; Shonkoff, et. al., 2009; Waldfogel, Craigie, & Brooks-Gunn, 2010).

The ability to navigate trauma is understood as a cognitive function (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2015a; Crosby, 2015). Within this framing, a trauma-informed approach “positions self-regulation as a core developmental strength for children” (Brunzell, Waters, & Stokes, 2015a, p.4). To successfully support young learners who have experienced overwhelming incidents, schooling must prepare them to be developmentally prepared “in domains such as regulatory capacities and relational abilities—domains that research shows have been compromised” (Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2015b, p.79). Examples include “behavior management systems” that incorporate strategies like speaking to students in a low voice or enacting a predictable routine for students (Downing, n. d., p. 17). Strategies such as these are suggested because these children are understood to be unable to regulate their emotions on their own and “may need adults who are willing to co-regulate with them when their emotions run wild” (Bath, 2008, p. 20).

Critiques of the Dominant Frame

The reductive biomedical model locates the problem to be solved within the learners themselves. It is imperative to understand this approach as one possible framing, considering that the way a problem or issue is framed delineates a range of possible solutions (Golden, 2017a; Yanow, 2000). The thinking flowing from this framing goes something like this: Children who do not succeed in school fail as a result of the traumas they have experienced; if educators pay attention to trauma and self-regulation, children will excel and achieve. Dorado and colleagues (2016), for example, suggest that a trauma-informed pedagogical lens can interrupt what has come to be known as the school-to-prison-pipeline, and offer necessary support to young students experiencing violence in under-resourced communities. Within this framing, the “problem behaviors” of students can be adapted into more positive coping mechanisms, and this focus on self-regulation will lead to academic and social success (Dorado, Martinez, McArthur, & Leibovitz, 2016, p.164). While some advocates of this simplistic framing claim to eschew deficit-laden approaches to trauma-informed pedagogy and call for a strengths-based approach (e.g., Brunzell, Stokes, & Waters, 2015b), this framing overwhelmingly locates the problem in the students and pathologizes them.

Further, this approach assumes a static, culture-free, and ahistorical understanding of normative behavior. That is, what is considered an appropriate way of being or a valid response to a challenging situation is not seen as socially or culturally mediated. Yet racial, gendered, or class bias, among others, shape what behaviors are deemed appropriate (or for whom they are warranted or permitted), leading scholars (e.g., Blitz, Anderson, & Saastamoinen, 2016) to call for culturally responsive trauma-informed pedagogies.

Other scholars go further, calling out the simplistic framing as a process that engenders a “disordered other... an objectified deficit identity” (Pyscher, 2015, p. 4). Within this deeper critique, resistance to cultural imperialism is discounted as “problem behavior,” and “used to rationalize acts of disposal and containment of youth who do not fall in line with the logics of efficiency” (Pyscher & Lozenski, 2014, p. 532). These critiques maintain that trauma-informed pedagogies can reinscribe hegemonies and work to further marginalize some youth. This possibility raises the question of how young people can be expected to feel safe and valued in schools when the schools themselves may be the site of current (or past) traumas (Gaffney, 2019), or when schools’ cultural practices minoritize students by devaluing their strengths and funds of knowledge (Petroni, in press).

Understanding Trauma as Ecological

Trauma-informed approaches may have the potential to offer generative and supportive learning opportunities for minoritized youth *when grounded in environmental issues and sociocultural understandings of trauma, its causes, and its effects*. I argue that there must be renewed attention paid to sociocultural factors,

particularly through a focus on young people's meaning-making around traumas they have experienced as well as their experiences of enacted trauma-informed pedagogies. As language instantiates culture and narratives are shared within and shaped by cultural contexts, a focus on young people's narratives can help shift trauma-informed pedagogy from a focus on a deficit-laden individual learner to a focus on young people's experiences and ecologies.

Ecology is "the study of the interrelationship of organisms and their environments" and "applied to cultural phenomena... is the interrelationship of an area of human activity and its environment" (Barton, 2002, p. 138). How, then, might trauma "[influence] and be influenced by the environment" (p. 138)? Rather than understanding trauma solely as the biomedical responses of an individual, we might ask larger questions: While all people experience trauma (to widely varying degrees), for what kinds of people are traumas expected? For whom are privileges expected, and for whom are injustices a daily experience? How do cultural stories work to normalize these differences in our society?

To explore these questions, and to reflect on how they might shape trauma-informed practices in specific environments, Crosby (2015) argues:

Helping traumatized students to be successful requires a departure from the status quo, where all staff are knowledgeable about trauma and effective ways to address it. It also requires school practitioners to consider their impact on students' ecologies, and the potential for trauma-informed practices in improving these ecologies. This ensures that traumatized youths are not simply discarded as nuisances to the school setting but are embraced and cultivated into individuals who can build for themselves a better future. (p. 229)

Moving beyond the simplistic biomedical model and the pedagogical practices thought to be effective in mitigating the "fight or flight" response, educators "should recognize their positioning in their students' ecosystems... [and that] schools may only represent one microsystem in the lives of their students" (Crosby, 2015, p. 227). Within an ecological model, "all school staff should strive to understand how their interactions with youths may affect other systems" (p. 227). As noted above, these interactions in the microsystem of schools may intensify rather than ameliorate ongoing traumas.

Systems beyond school also have an impact on youth and their experiences of trauma. Social systems may produce a real or perceived safety for some while it dispossesses others of necessary resources (e.g., housing, health care, education). Weis and Fine (2012) argue that "dispossession stories are always situated within a political economy, usually in the context of swelling inequality gaps," impacting "health outcomes, psychological well-being, civic engagements, economics, and involvement with the criminal justice system" (p.187). For this reason, scholars and practitioners should not think of trauma as solely a biomedical response or process, but as produced through a broader ecology and taking on meanings through relationships with cultural stories. Without this sociocultural framing, the ability to navigate or process traumatic experiences will be understood only at the individual unit of analysis, locating deficits within individual learners and drawing our attention away from problematic social systems (Golden, 2017b).

Care networks and possibilities for healing and support can also be understood as ecological. Building knowledge on young people's understandings of their worlds illuminates how *they* see "the material, emotional and collective practices through which children and adults together create and recreate daily life" (Luttrell, 2013, p. 295). Understanding the challenges that individual people face as "personal problems... often lead[s] researchers to emphasize individual interventions" (Goodkind, Hess, Gorman, & Parker, 2014, p. 1021). Moving to an ecological model unlocks deeper understandings of the social production of individual

challenges, building knowledge of “not only social suffering but also how narratives about trauma and social suffering are constructed... [N]arratives can open up productive possibilities for healing” (p. 1021). In this sense, trauma and care networks can be understood to be cultural and socio-historical in addition to biological and individual.

Valuing young people’s narratives can broaden our understandings of generative trauma-informed pedagogies, deepening knowledge of both the social processes that lead to trauma and the care networks that may mitigate its effects. Pedagogical processes have the potential to contribute to students’ care networks or to intensify minoritization, and a focus on students’ narratives can inform how particular practices enacted by educators are taken up by young people in specific contexts.

A Focus on Meaning-Making

The valuing of young people’s meanings has begun to take root in recent scholarship and educator praxis. Ellison (2014) argues that “trauma narratives are relevant for the way they are told and received” (p.13). To be clear: trauma itself cannot be reduced to a narrative, but narratives are how people engage in retrospective meaning-making of their traumatic experiences. This retrospective meaning-making can be an important site of healing and can engender networks of care and support. Stories of past experience can lead to catharsis (Wissman & Wiseman, 2011), and classrooms can be important sites of testimony and witness (Dutro, 2009).

Within this body of recent scholarship, trauma-informed pedagogies shift from a set of practices in response to the fight or flight biological phenomenon and may include a need for teachers’ vulnerability, or personal connections that move beyond standards-driven learning targets. Dutro (2011) calls for a pedagogy of “critical witness” that can “explode...boundaries” by “connect[ing] deeply to students’ experiences and be[ing] highly cognizant of the differing consequences they bear” (p. 208). This vulnerability, connection, and the act of critical witnessing can strengthen pedagogical processes and relationships in learning spaces, broadening our understanding of trauma-informed practice.

Building New Understandings Through Trauma Discourse

Violet and Carlos, the young people introduced above, are students in the Conexiones program. Situated within the Dolores Huerta Alternative Learning Complex (DHALC), the Conexiones program is a “second-chance” continuation school run by the San Sebastián Unified School District. The program is grounded in an ethos of trauma-informed pedagogy in which educators strive to keep past and current struggles in mind while supporting their students.

Learners seeking a secondary diploma in the Conexiones program live in the west coast city of San Sebastián.¹ They are primarily Mexican-American, mostly working class or experiencing poverty, and either second-generation or generation 1.5 (those who immigrate to a new country before or during their early teens) immigrants. Learners come to the Conexiones program at DHALC for a range of reasons, but all have become “over-age/under-credited students” at their initial high school. The school views its trauma-informed approach as a form of humanizing pedagogy. In the words of the founding principal, Mr. E., the ethos of the program is “more than just about academics. It really is about the holistic view of a person and humanity and the kid and how they are going to impact the world.” This holistic view is grounded in a network of support for both students and teachers, one that Mr. E. refers to as a “therapeutic web.”

What this means to individual students, of course, varies. The following narrative data were collected in

1 The name of the program, learning complex, district, and city are pseudonyms.

one of a series of after-school focus group sessions during the first two years of a three-year study, and were shared with me, as the principal investigator, a white-identified researcher, and teacher educator. In these sessions, the students were asked about and shared their learning and life experiences and reflected on instructional practice and learning processes in the Conexiones program. What they shared illuminates what trauma-informed practice meant for them, and how the program supported them as they worked towards their goals of high school graduation and post-secondary life paths.

Violet and Carlos define themselves as Chicana and Chicano, respectively, and were raised in a working-class area of San Sebastián. They were about to graduate from the Conexiones program at the time they shared in a focus group why they had been successful there. They attribute their success in the Conexiones program to their teachers being prepared to hear their stories and to honor the experiences that brought them to the “second-chance” alternative learning program. Their previous schools were sites of trauma in which they were positioned as “bad kids.” At Conexiones, they are not bad kids, but young scholars in challenging circumstances that may have impacted their ability to succeed in and through school. Once they attended an educational program where teachers were trained to hear and honor their stories, they were able to accomplish their academic goals.

Violet shared an example of this: In her previous school, she would get anxiety attacks, something she experiences with regularity. She would ask to step out of the classroom for a few minutes, but her teachers would not let her do this. At Conexiones, though, Violet said that her teacher had a different approach. Ms. Santos, a Filipino-American who worked to build strong relationships with her students, understood that Violet “was going through some things and ... let me step outside and really calm down and breathe and I know everything is going to be okay, but back in the old high school... I would have had to stay in the classroom.” Carlos said:

[W]hen I got in a fight that one time, like, my other high school would have taken it like I would have gotten arrested right there and then but here they talk to me, like, ‘What triggered you to react that way?’ or ‘What happened?’ They actually heard the story before they judged what was going to happen. Then when they found out that I didn’t start it, like, they took the load off me and then they heard what I had to say, but at my other high school they would’ve been like, ‘Oh no, you can’t, you’re a certain age, you’re going to jail, you’re done, get out of here.’

Violet concurred, comparing her current and former schools: “It’s like, it’s like I said before, um, here they hear both sides of the story and over there it was like, “no, you’re a bad kid, no.”

In their previous educational programs, Violet and Carlos had been positioned as bad kids, as young people with entrenched negativities. These were cultural stories that Violet and Carlos had to try to work against as they attempted to earn their educations. At the DHALC Conexiones program, there was a discourse of trauma and education, one that framed negative experiences as things that may have happened to individual young people but did not define them.² This sort of positioning, along with a care network that included their teacher, Ms. Santos, was integral to their academic success. Contrasting the DHALC Conexiones program with her previous school, Violet said:

Something that would never happen [at DHALC] would be that people did not see the potential that every kid has. They [educators at her previous school] only focus on honors students or average students and they give more, I feel like in my opinion, they give more opportunities to

2 In Violet’s and Carlos’ shared experiences, this was seen as a positive, though it is important to recognize that such an approach can lead to people “splitting” their identities into “good” and “bad” senses of themselves in problematic ways. For more on this, see Luttrell (2003).

those kids. And I feel like that's how I started not believing in myself. I feel like I was less than I was...

Violet's and Carlos' previous schools were sites of negative positioning in which there were assumptions about who they were and who they could become. When given opportunities to share their stories and to experience these stories as important, they were invited into care networks by people like Ms. Santos who worked with them to help them accomplish their educational goals.

Reflections and Implications

For these young scholars, “trauma-informed” is synonymous with a humanizing pedagogy, one in which they are not automatically assumed to be “bad kids.” Within this ethos, young people can define themselves and make mistakes without their errors being seen as entrenched dispositions or commentaries on their possible life trajectories. It is a pedagogy grounded in relationships in which they are known as promising young people who have been through difficult circumstances or experiences.

Within these narratives and reflections, trauma-informed has nothing to do with self-regulation or executive function. For these adolescent scholars, what matters is whether the educators they see every day are part of their care network or people who exacerbate tensions or challenges in other areas of their lives. This approach—in contrast to the biomedical framing of trauma, which locates the “problem” and “solution” within the individual—illuminates networks of care and positionings, including those that stem from educators working within an entrenched deficit model. In particular, an ecological framing can illuminate networks of care that need to be tended, supported, and expanded for minoritized adolescent scholars to achieve their goals in and beyond formal education. Indeed, this discourse on trauma provides building blocks for young people to construct counter-narratives that can challenge other cultural stories of entrenched individual deficiencies. Finally, a sociocultural framing can retain a focus on the ways deep gaps in social systems are experienced by individuals, making it clear that it is these severe inequities that we need to fix, and not “bad” or “broken” people.

To ascertain whether or not a trauma-informed pedagogical practice is debilitating for learners, we need to pay our attention to youth voices, understandings, and narratives of lived experience. Further, teachers need to work to build relationships with young people so that these young people can trust their teachers and choose how and when to share these narratives. This necessitates educational environments in which teachers are able to build these strong relationships. With sociocultural understandings of both trauma and care, young people can draw on a broad array of resources to better understand the challenges they have experienced, and generate and receive care and support that goes far beyond their individual cognitive powers of self-regulation.

Researchers would do well to focus on the meanings young people make or take up as they work to make sense of their past experience, current realities, and future possibilities. Educators would do well to eschew biomedical framings that locate these issues at the individual level and instead work to build trust and value framings that illuminate ecologies of privilege, dispossession, and care. We ignore young people's meaning-making possibilities to our detriment as we work to theorize, research, and enact what a culturally responsive and strength-based trauma-informed pedagogy might look like in any given context.

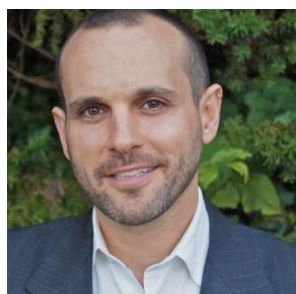
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