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Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7xf221r0

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Publication Date
2019-08-16

Evaluating the Normative View on Parental Involvement

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Introduction

Youth who are impacted by trauma at home might not have a safe space away from triggering events and individuals whom have induced their trauma. Ideally, there should be spaces, for youth, away from home which would allow them to distance themselves from the triggering elements that exist there. Currently, however, youth occupy certain spaces away from home where their parents are involved. Thus, there is no separation for those who experience trauma at home and those who are the catalysts to that trauma.

If this problem is not addressed, youth in these spaces will continue to experience, and be triggered by, traumatic events and individuals. Research shows that trauma inhibits the ability for youth to concentrate and learn. Moreover, research on complex PTSD has shown that children who continually undergo fight or flight when confronted with something triggering have a shorter life expectancy, higher chances of cardiovascular issues, and a permanent rewiring of the brain that can cause a variety of mental health issues.

In order to address this problem, I need to know whether parental involvement can be counterproductive in a space which harbors youth experiencing trauma. Further, I need to know what defines a safe space, how youth define it, and how to properly identify the children whom experience trauma and whether they are interacting with parental figures.

Research Question

How does the provision of safe spaces for youth dealing with trauma interact with Mar Vista Family Center's commitment to parental involvement?

Literature Review

The Complexity of Trauma

Trauma results from an event, or a series of events and circumstances, that individuals experience as physically or emotionally harmful and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, emotional, physical, or social well-being (Mullaney, 2018). Accordingly, experts have named these three components of trauma, "the three 'E's'": event, experience, and effects (Mullaney, 2018).

When studying youth who deal with trauma, it should be noted that the term "trauma" is often used interchangeably with the term "adverse childhood experiences". Defining "adverse childhood experiences", or ACEs, can inform a richer understanding of the "trauma" being addressed in this research (Learn, 2014).

ACEs are those circumstances inflicted upon, and beyond the control of, a child. Direct experiences include, but are not limited to, suffering sexual, verbal, or physical abuse, having a parent who suffers from mental illness or alcoholism, having a mother who is a domestic violence victim, having an incarcerated family member, and losing a parent through divorce or abandonment (Learn, 2014).

Prevalence

Recent studies suggest that 68% of adolescents have experienced at least one traumatic experience in their lifetime (Langley, et al, 2013). Millions of children undergo adverse childhood experiences, the majority of which occurs within the family environment where biological parents have been identified as the perpetrators of 81% of substantiated cases of child maltreatment in the United States (Hodgdon, et al, 2013).

The Unhealthy Impacts of Trauma

Developmental and environmental factors are involved in the programming of an appropriate response to stressful conditions. Children and adolescents are incredibly susceptible

to stress which makes for unhealthy responses in the brain and maladaptive learning behaviors when undergoing trauma during crucial periods of development (Steck & Steck, 2016).

Chronic and repetitive traumatic stressful exposure affect multiple developmental domains such as regulation of affect and impulses, memory, attention, interpersonal relations, and may lead to the development of mental disorders such as anxiety, depression, and complex PTSD (Steck & Steck, 2016). Furthermore, chronic trauma eventually affects the entire body with increased risk of developing cardiovascular disorders, insulin-resistant diabetes, immune suppression, and reproductive impairments (Steck & Steck, 2016).

Youth who perpetually experience trauma live much of their lives in fight or flight mode, responding to the world as a place of constant danger (Learn, 2014). Flooded with stress hormones, they can't focus on learning (Steck & Steck, 2016). There is a consensus among experts who argue that the systems which intend to serve children and support their upward social mobility actually as systems which exacerbate symptoms of trauma (Steck & Steck, 2016).

The Importance of Safety

When youth feel unsafe, their biological response to the perception of threat compromises their ability to attend to and process information, making it even more difficult to learn and thrive; however, some neurobiological and behavioral changes can be reversed by treatment interventions (Steck & Steck, 2016). Various studies demonstrate that the negative consequences of early traumatic exposure can be alleviated by secure attachment relationships with alternative care persons, and the creation of a safe space for growth opportunities (Leenarts, et al, 2013).

Creation of Safe Spaces

Places for learning can foster a safe space for youth by providing a supportive, respectful, and caring environment where students are both secure from physical and emotional harm and supervised through the cultivation of meaningful relationships (Themane & Osher, 2014). For youth to be able to learn in an educational space there must be both a sense of safety and a provision of support (Themane & Osher, 2014). Support does not need to take the form of conversations on trauma in order to be trauma-sensitive. A supportive adult can empower youth to find services that meet their needs on their own (Themane & Osher, 2014).

The Complexity of Parental Involvement

Literature has well established that parent involvement makes a difference in a child's education; studies indicate that parental involvement is strongly associated with enhanced levels of student achievement in both primary and secondary education (Kirkhaug, et al, 2013).

In creating a space for youth to feel safe, parental involvement seems to be an unnecessary condition (Cottee & Roman, 2014). There are some studies that have found direct effects of parental involvement on adolescent outcomes but have not found evidence that parental involvement has a protective effect (Hardaway, et al, 2016).

In one study, parental involvement was not protective against externalizing problems when adolescents were exposed to trauma (Dods, 2015). Another study found that parental support did not moderate the association between traumatic events and symptoms of anxiety and depression (Hardaway, et al, 2016).

Some youth do not want parental involvement, and while this is sometimes seen as a normal shift towards autonomy, there are some youth who could be trying to avoid confronting trauma at home (Trost, et al, 2007). In order to distance themselves from risks existing in their home, youth can decide on the extent to which they are exposed to these psychosocial risks

based on whether their emotional ties and their leisure activities are largely within or outside the

home environment. Individuals from high-risk backgrounds often felt the need to detach

themselves from their parents (Richman & Fraser, 2001)

Methodology

Evaluative Interviews

I conducted evaluative interviews with staff and volunteers in order to better understand

the space of which they occupy and create. Additionally, many of the staff members have gone

through the program themselves or have children who are, or have been in, the program

themselves.

My interviews reflected the social conditions relevant to my research question and the

epistemological approach of the study as throughout all of my interviews I maintained the notion

that the space that I created and occupied was one of safety.

All participants were seen and involved as knowing subjects who brought their perspective

into the knowledge-production process. Therefore, to establish trust and mutual understanding, I

disclosed bits of the study's background.

Analytic Memos

In addition to the interviews themselves, I have collected data from memos that span

from conversations with individuals at Mar Vista Family Center and also individuals at other

centers in order to effectively gain a grounded standard for assessing and providing a safe space

to youth.

The process of analytic memo writing allowed me to document and reflect on my coding

process and my coding choices and how the process of inquiry took shape.

Theoretical Framework

The Ecological Model

The ecological model studies how an individual is influenced and impacted by their environment which can manifest adaptive or maladaptive behaviors in that person. The environmental systems in constant interaction include the micro system, mezzo system, and the macro system (Bronfenbrenner, 1979).

The micro system is, "a pattern of activities, roles, and interpersonal relations experienced by the developing person in a given setting with particular physical and material characteristics" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In a school setting the micro system would focus on how a trauma informed program is impacting student to student relationships as well as student to faculty relationships. The culture of the school, meaning how behaviors or issues are addressed and discussed by staff, can have a large impact on conversation surrounding trauma and creating a trauma informed culture in a child's most intimate interactions is crucial.

The mezzo-system is defined as "the interrelations among two or more settings in which the developing person actively participates (such as, for a child, the relations among home, school, and neighborhood peer group; for an adult, among family, work, and social life)" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the school setting the mezzo system considers the impact of programming among faculty and colleagues. How faculty can encourage knowledge on the subject of trauma and discuss possible barriers or flaws in programming hindering outreach and connection to students.

Lastly Bronfenbrenner (1979) defines the macro-system as "consistencies, in the form and content of lower-order system (micro and mezzo) that exist or could exist, at the level of the subculture or the culture as a whole, along with any belief systems or ideologies underlying such

consistencies" (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). In the school context the macro system considers administrative and district-wide policies that may be impacting programming.

The Triad Spatial Model

This model explores how our experiences of the three types of space—the conceived space, the perceived space and the lived space—are based on the way a space is designed and constructed and the way we make sense of that space (Lefebvre, 1991).

The conceived space is the way a space is designed and the rules that are applicable to that space. This involves the things that are present in the space, things that can be seen and what can be observed in the space (Lefebvre, 1991).

The second space, the perceived space, is the way an actual space is viewed and observed by its users, and the expectation they have of that space (Lefebvre, 1991). If the conceived space is considered to be the ideal space, then the perceived space is the actual space and the way it is valued (Lefebvre, 1991).

The third type is the lived space; this type of space describes the way the users live in the space. It describes the human experience of its users; the actions they undertake in this space, their imaginations, feelings and actual experiences the users of a space have in the space (Lefebvre, 1991).

The presence of people in a space also determines how it is lived, because the spaces represent the bodies that are present in that space, and power relations between these people can be expressed (Lefebvre, 1991). This is what activities take place at the space, how these activities take place, who are present when these activities take place, and how the activities are being experienced by the participants (Lefebvre, 1991).

Our experiences are based on the way a space is designed and constructed and the way we make sense of that space (Lefebvre, 1991). As described above, the perceived space is the way that people value and make sense of the space. Thus, individuals make sense of these spaces depending on the experiences and social interactions the users have. In other words, they are socially constructed.

Social Constructivist Theory

Social constructivism is a movement in the social sciences that claims that everyone constructs information differently, and that these differences come from the various ways in which individuals "acquire, select, interpret and organize that information" (Adams, 2006).

The individual is actively participating in conceiving and shaping the information, through permanent interaction with the world (Adams, 2006). The way they construct this information is not individual, but the result of social interaction. Through this social interaction, individuals interpret and understand information and knowledge (Adams, 2006). And this social interaction plays a decisive role in the understanding and interpretation of information and knowledge (Adams, 2006).

Therefore, information and knowledge cannot be separated from the social environment it is formed in, but it can be seen as a process of active construction (Adams, 2006).

People are always experiencing things and make sense of these experiences (Adams, 2006).

These notions of sensemaking by social constructivism and the three types of space is a chosen theoretical framework because the goals for this research is to gain insights in the way the participating youth at MVFC make sense of the notion of safe spaces program.

Presentation of Findings

In all six of my evaluative interviews, I found that every participant named safety to be linked with parental communication about their children. This meant keeping the children off the street and inside the facilities, keeping in contact with parents at all times, and having parents present at the center.

Those at Mar Vista Family Center mentioned that in addition to this parental communication that safety meant, "allowing children to be themselves".

These two conditions and interpretations of a safe space were consistent with other after school programs with a similar mission to Mar Vista Family Center.

As I looked at all 35 of my memos, I found that there were many links to this idea of safety. For most, safety meant involving the parents and giving the children a space without threat from outside of the facility borders.

In addition, I found that in all of my interviews and discussions with those at Mar Vista Family Center and with other organizations, the idea of parental involvement being triggering was a question that was not thought of at the organizations themselves.

By this, most of these conversations led to the notion of referrals to centers who handle trauma-based care, to reporting instances of trauma to child services.

Though the mission of these organizations was to create a safe space, most employed a model where parental involvement was enforced and each individual programming model was not tailored to individuals when bringing them into the program.

Furthermore, when asked about their understanding of trauma as it pertained to child-parent relationships, every participant at Mar Vista Family Center showed that their understanding of the term dealt with abuse.

When defining ACEs and the umbrella topics that trauma could cover all participants mentioned that there were one or more things that they had not associated with the term trauma.

Though there is a clearly defined safe space for parents to reflect and to work through trauma, it seems as though the one established for youth is less structured. I mentioned this place of structure in my initial analysis of the shared responsibility model in my memos, where I talked about the ways in which it is imposed upon youth, without asking for their input, or taking their case by case stories into consideration.

One way that MVFC claims that it provides a safe space for youth is in the pre-teen room. The members that fit into this age group all are welcome to interact in this room, where a participant stated, "They can talk to each other about school, homework, problems at school, or whatever they want." The participant also noted that the older youth are much more difficult to communicate with when it comes to working through issues. They claimed that it was probably because, "they are just at the age where they wanted independence."

The programs in place at Mar Vista Family Center allow parents and youth to be empowered. This word, "empowerment," or, "empowering" came up consistently in my interviews at the center. For example, there is a "By Youth for Youth" program at Mar Vista Family Center, which allows pre-teens to young adults to lead group-based discussions and exercises and to have a certain political process amongst one another.

There is a session in these adult-supervised meetings that allows youth to express anything they would like with one another; this exercise is called "clearing". This allows youth to open up in many ways and to share things that can then be, "empathized with, empowering, and helpful by getting feedback from their peers."

According to observations and my interviews, "most" youth did not bring up trauma as it related to home or parental relationships. They did, however, talk about traumatic events at school, and in their communities.

Parents were able to vocalize their own concerns with political figures at their local town hall meetings held at the center. This monthly meeting, spoken in mostly Spanish, allows parents to bring up needs and concerns to the leaders of the center and to public officials from the city itself. Youth did not participate at these observed events.

Also, parents of children in the preschool program were able to bring up difficulties in their relationships with youth. This happens every day of the week for one hour while the children nap.

In this session, staff members mentioned, many of the parents improved their relationship with their children by getting feedback and effective strategies to dealing with problems at home. Parents also vocalized traumas of their own, from growing up in traumatic households to being involved in traumatic situations presently. This session allows parents to open up and share ways that they have been taught to parent and how they can be, "reprogrammed in a way," according to one participant. When asked about the session and how it empowered parents in particular, the participant answered that:

> "Some of the parent class sessions are based on parents looking back on the way that they were parented. This gives them the opportunity to observe themselves and reflect on the ways in which they picked up parenting styles. It gives them the opportunity to tell their story, and to change the narrative."

With all of this in mind, there are no councilors or staff members who deal with mental health alone on site. There was a counselor in the past who would train the staff once a year.

Staff were trained on dealing with vicarious trauma that came from discussing difficult situations with families. Their method of coping with such vicarious trauma was to, "build a screen", said three participants. This allows staff to separate themselves from the individuals in a professional setting while also handing the situation in an appropriate and conditional way.

When asked about their policy on dealing with personal cases and who youth and parents turned to, the answer was always, in every interview, an "open door policy," where youth could visit staff members, particularly the head of the center, in order to talk about personal struggles.

Parents were indicated as talking to staff more than children in these open-door meetings. Preteens and young adults were found to be less vulnerable and frequented the staff members about such incidents less, particularly male youth members.

Mar Vista Family Center uses the "five question" method with both parents and youth:

1. What is the problem?

2. I hear the problem. What do you want?

3. What are you doing about it?

4. Is that working for you?

5. What else do you think you might do?

This gives back the responsibility to the parent for them to reflect, to hear themselves, and to reframe the way they approach their parenting.

Discussion

The Normative Interpretation of Safety

Mar Vista Family Center, like all of the other organizations I held discussions with, deeply cared about their youth and the education that they were receiving in addition to the safety that they felt at the center.

Though this was the case, none of the conversations or interviews had a clear answer for whether they approach, think of, or have thought of the possible negative effect of bringing both youth and parents into the center together.

In fact, many of the reactions from this notion presented themselves as baffled and protective of their mission.

It is clear that there are two normative views on safe spaces:

Safe spaces protect youth from threats on the street, and safe spaces should involve the parents.

In regard to parental involvement, the normative view is that it is a good and necessary condition for learning environments and for safety.

These normative views were consistent across the board and, at least, appear to be consistent in other areas of research due to the lack of literature on the matter.

Because of these normative views on safe spaces, there was not a clear vision on the perception of safety vs. the creation of safety. What I mean by this is that though the centers attempt to create a safe space for youth based on their presuppositions of what safety entails, their intent did not match the notion of impact and whether having parents involved could be problematic.

With the lack of regard for impact in this area, it seems as though, for certain individual cases of youth dealing with trauma, they may in fact be triggered in these spaces, their trauma may be perpetuated, and thus, they may be developing and learning in a maladaptive way.

This notion is of course an extrapolation and may insight a fallacy of a slippery slope; however, it is clear that there needs to be more research on the impact of such environments on youth.

A Lack of Attention to Trauma

The centers and the participants of interviews all presented a lack of understanding for the intricacies within the term, "trauma". They showed that when presented with issues of trauma, they either exported the issues with other organizations that deal with such issues, or they reported them.

Trauma seems to be an incredibly present issue with youth and can be incredibly detrimental. Thus, it seems that there should be room for it to be dealt with at any organization harboring youth, whether it is within their mission statement or not.

Compare notions of safety at the centers with two organizations who focus on trauma-informed care in their mission:

> "Our staff is committed to providing the highest quality care by interacting with our patients in a therapeutic way, looking at each individual patient and not just the symptoms."

> "The goal of our program is to provide critical resources and empower young people to take control of their lives, supported by trauma-informed care, harm reduction, and positive youth development strategies in a safe, non-judgmental environment."

There is more attention paid to the youth and their case by case conditions while still bringing up language of empowerment.

Without noting the implications of trauma and simply applying models of enforced parental involvement, youth are placed into spaces where they are actually disempowered by having no control over the conditions of their environment.

The Regulation of Voices by Unidirectional Approaches

Mar Vista Family Center's shared responsibility model is implemented into their framework and enforced upon members without the democratic approval of some of their most vulnerable individuals, the youth.

What this means is that youth are brought into a center and program by their parents or guardians and are put into a space that enforces parental involvement without notice of youth having their own say as to whether they want parental involvement or not.

While there is much literature on the good impact of parental involvement, there is this very issue, of establishing a relationship from the very first stage of welcoming families, where children are not acknowledged as having a say in their interactions with parents.

Based on the literature, some youth may not want parental involvement for a variety of reasons, and one may be the need to distance themselves from triggering individuals from home.

To feel safe is to feel welcome, to feel empowered, and to feel as though one's own knowledge can be actualized freely without the unilateral disposition of others within the space.

Discussing Further

Though my study does not confirm that youth who deal with trauma are definitely triggered in such environments, it does suggest that the issue at hand is not being given adequate attention.

These centers deeply care about their youth members and it is not a matter of neglect purposefully, it is simply a matter of criticizing their views on parental involvement and safety at large due to the overwhelming data on how good parental involvement may be for youth. Thus, they would surely employ a method of ensuring safety if only this matter was understood more and taken into consideration when acknowledged.

This of course is an assumption as it seems as though Mar Vista Family Center does deal with funding impairments and thus, focuses attention to their mission and model, rather than creating a space where the perception of such an environment is actually not enforcing parental involvement for all youth; rather than employing a counselor, they employ an open-door policy.

Youth who do not initially come to staff members could potentially be afraid of the repercussions of doing so; i.e. being taken away from homes, being disciplined by parental figures, taking for granted the privileges given to them at the center.

At Mar Vista Center in particular, there should be attention paid to this as it relates to culture.

In one interview with a parent and staff member who went through the entire program as a child and now has a child in the program as well, they mentioned the difficulty in bringing up criticism toward the center as a child. They mentioned that coming from a family of immigrants, they felt as though they could not criticize certain conditions as they were perceived and taught to be things to be grateful for and not to be taken for granted. They mentioned that they would not, "bite the hand that fed me".

Thus, youth may not discuss such traumas or criticisms of having their parents present not just because of their age, but because of their culture, socioeconomic status, and their upbringing.

Bringing up concerns even amongst their peers in the teen program seems to be lacking and it does not take place in a space where they can vocalize concerns to adults or public officials like their parents.

Though the programs that seek to empower them actually do in many ways, youth may be disempowered in other ways through the stifling of their individual voice and concerns.

Limitations

Communicating and reaching staff; conducting interviews within my time frame; the inability to collect data from youth; and the lack of research around this topic were all limitations for this study.

When it comes to contacting individuals, there was a significant delay in response. In order to face this problem, I attempted to go to the center without prior appointment in order to reach out to staff then. The problem that arose in this occasion most was the inability for staff to step away from their work due to the lack of staff present at the time. Without this timely communication, it made it difficult to set up interviews within my designated time frame.

My concern with the inability for me to collect data from youth is that I was not displaying the same democratic necessity that I have critiqued Mar Vista Family Center for lacking. Still, there was some research around this topic surrounding youth, and by partnering with other local organizations who do foster a safe space, I understood a bit more about how I can regard that input into my data.

Finally, because there was a lack of research around my topic, I found it incredibly difficult to come up with a basis for my study. I find that this case study may fill some minor gaps in the literature; however, there is still much work to be done.

Areas for Future Research

Because this topic seems to be largely neglected, there needs to be more research around the problematic holes in parental involvement and the establishment of safe spaces when enforcing such involvement.

This research is incredibly necessary as youth are participating in spaces where they may be perpetually triggered and disempowered in a very localized way. They may be struggling to even assert their concerns around this due to the normalization of trauma in their lives.

Therefore, it seems necessary too for there to be future research on the normalization of trauma when put into conditions that perpetuate such relationships and conditions, and when youth are not able to form separate, healthy relationships with alternative care givers due to a lack of separation from home.

There needs to be even more research on whether youth who do indicate implicit means of separating themselves from parents may actually be doing so because of trauma at home. This notion encourages researchers to look into spaces that are regarding youth as going through phases, or being difficult due to age, rather than their home environment.

These topics require researchers to look further into parental involvement at a bidirectional level, including the youth, and its impacts holistically.

Case by case individuals with problematic child-parent relationships need to be studied more rather than groups.

Finally, the lack of dialogue amongst youth and staff should be looked into as either a normalized response to trauma, or as a possible problem stemming from fear of repercussions from such conversations.

Conclusion

Though centers like Mar Vista Family Center work hard to establish a safe space with intention, there is little to no attention paid to the problematic normative view that enforced parental involvement is always good thing.

While harboring youth in any space, it seems that there should be care for a trauma aware, safe space. This means that organizations will need to adjust their models and implementations of such models to each individual and they will need to treat every individual as an active agent with a voice to be heard on the space and the perception of it. Without a bidirectional dialogue, there is little room for improving the space for youth to thrive and learn in an environment that all can enjoy, not just a number, or a majority, of them.

Attention must be given to this issue in both the organizations themselves and the research that is being conducted around such organizations and topics. Normative views only lead to perpetuating a problematic chain of issues that can only provide negative outcomes to such individuals. There needs to be care in speaking highly of parental involvement without giving it criticism, just as organizations should continually be critical of their structure and their space as a safe one.

With my case study of Mar Vista Family Center and this issue within it, I find that there are many areas to applaud the effort that they put into the work they do; still, there needs to be a way for discourse to take place in all of these spaces that bring youth and parents together by necessity.

There is an urgency for these spaces to adapt to the needs of the community members served, to serve the youth wholly, and to bring about more awareness to the intricacies that exist in cases of trauma, in creating and living in a space, in enforcing parental involvement, and in empowering youth.

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