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Introduction

Throughout my career, I have had the opportunity to work with many students and families who experienced various forms of trauma. I have worked with families who experienced trauma related to the loss of a loved one, persistent food and housing insecurity, and multi-generational drug and alcohol addictions. I have worked with children who were traumatized by chronic harassment and discrimination, exposure to domestic violence, and tumultuous parental divorces. While I learned many valuable lessons as a result of working with these children and families, the most important lesson I learned was that judging families serves no productive purpose – it only further alienates, further shames, and further traumatizes. As educators, adopting non-judgmental views of students and families is critical in the development of safe, socially just schools (Missouri Department of Social Services Children’s Division and The Full Frame Initiative 2016; Theoharis 2009), yet sometimes our lack of self-awareness and problematic ideological positions lead us to judge. For example, many educators adopt deficit ideological views of families–a perspective that leads educators to stereotype marginalized families and attribute educational disparities to families’ perceived deficiencies (Gorski 2008; Gorski 2016). Not only does deficit ideology serve to further marginalize the most marginalized families (e.g., poor, minority families), it also creates social, psychological, and cultural conditions in which passing judgment is both acceptable and justifiable (Gorski 2012; Patterson, Hale, and Stessman 2007).

In all honesty, reaching this understanding took time, and I made many mistakes along the way. I made assumptions about families without really understanding their personal histories or the sociopolitical contexts in which they lived. I heard their stories without really listening. I watched other professionals treat them unjustly without ever saying a word. This essay describes my personal journey with families and the ideological shift I experienced as I became more self-aware and attentive to others’ stories. I tell my story, and with it the stories of others, in hopes that teachers, school leaders, and all school personnel will learn from my experiences and challenge themselves to engage in critical self-reflection, to bear witness to the stories of children and families who have experienced trauma, and to move beyond judgment.

“Righteous” Judgment is Still Judgment

I first started working with children and families when I was 23 years old. At the time, I was a graduate student completing my counseling internship within two community-based mental health agencies located in a rural, Midwestern community. Though my internship placements were unique, they both provided me opportunities to routinely counsel children and families who experienced trauma. I did not know it at the time, but these internship experiences set the stage for my continued work with families.

My primary internship placement was in a state-contracted foster care agency. The purpose of the agency was to support children and families who were involved with family services. I provided counseling to children who were removed from their homes or were at risk of removal.

I also counseled parents whose children had either been removed from their care or were at-risk of having their children removed. Nearly all of the cases involved parental drug and alcohol abuse and an ensuing list of additional challenges (e.g., child neglect or abuse, involvement in the criminal justice system, unemployment, etc.). While interning with this agency, I had the opportunity to receive specialized training in a group family therapy program for parents with addictions. After completing the training, I co-facilitated two parenting groups designed to improve the parenting skills of drug and alcohol-abusing parents. It was in this program that I first realized parents could love their children while simultaneously making decisions that were not in their best interest. Despite this understanding, I wanted to adopt most of the children I encountered. At the time, I had a limited understanding of drug and alcohol addiction, and I had no experience as a parent – yet neither of these points prevented me from deeming myself more qualified to raise children than the parents I counseled.

My second internship experience was with a truancy diversion program. The truancy diversion program was designed to monitor and support students who were reported to the courts as truant. My role was to provide court-ordered family counseling to these students and their caregivers. In order to complete the program, families were required to meet three goals: 1) students had to earn all passing grades; 2) students could not have any additional unexcused absences or tardies; and 3) the family had to work on any familial issues that may have contributed to the truancy. I worked with this program in various capacities for nearly five years, and in that time, I heard many families' stories. Almost all of these stories involved some form of trauma. Some families experienced trauma related to parental drug and alcohol addiction, some families experienced trauma related to the loss of a loved one, and some families were traumatized from their involvement in the criminal justice system. I heard many stories of hurt and despair, but I also heard stories of anger and resentment. It was not uncommon for parents to express their frustration with schools' policies, poor communication, lack of care, and inequitable treatment of "certain" families. I am not sure how many families I counseled during my tenure with the truancy diversion program, but I know that I did my best to help each and every family improve their functioning and learn better ways of engaging in educational processes. And I also know that I never once talked to a teacher or school leader about what schools could do differently to better support students and their families. Not once.

In hindsight, I recognized the "righteous" judgment I passed on families. I refer to my behavior as "righteous" judgment, because I did not blatantly judge families for their struggles. Rather, I listened to their stories and offered guidance and continued support. I hoped that my guidance and support would spur them to recognize their deficiencies and improve their functioning for the betterment of their children and families. I continually recognized a need for change, but I always assumed the onus for this change rested with the families–undoubtedly a reflection of deficit, paternalistic thinking. Paternalism is a type of thinking that "assumes moral and intellectual superiority," and when combined with deficit thinking, it can lead educators and other service-providers to believe their role is to "fix" or "save" disenfranchised families (Gorski 2008, 142-43). In my internship experiences, I never considered that families were already doing the best that they could. I never gave much thought to the many sociopolitical conditions (e.g., poverty, racism, discrimination, etc.) that continually oppressed the families I was serving. I never even recognized that they were continually judged by the people and organizations that

were designed to support them. I was an example. My "righteous" judgment was insidious. I was so busy "saving the world" I never even realized I was judging it.

Judgment Only Hurts

A few years later, I started working as a professional school counselor. It was in this position that my perspective on families began to change forever. I worked in a small, rural K-8 school; thus, I had the opportunity to build meaningful relationships with many of my students and their families. I, once again, heard stories of heartbreak, struggle, and trauma, but this time I understood their stories in more intimate, personal ways. I understood where they lived and worked. I understood their social networks. I understood the resources that were (un)available to them. I understood the challenges that living in a rural, high-poverty community created for so many of my students and their families. I better understood, because for the first time I not only heard their stories, I witnessed them.

I also realized not all educators demonstrate care and compassion for families. I observed this firsthand. One particular year, many school personnel, including myself, had worked extensively to offer support for one student and his family. The student was new to the district and learning to navigate a new school and community amidst extreme personal challenges. As an infant, he had been the victim of physical abuse that resulted in a traumatic brain injury and a lifetime of impairment. Without a doubt, this student and family had experienced trauma.

But it was one incident that forever changed my perspective on working with families.
One day, the student's young mother was late picking him up from school. When she arrived, the classroom teacher berated her, in the main office in front of everyone, for failing to pick her son up on time. While I was shocked by the public disparagement of the mother, I was even more disheartened when I considered the struggles this mother likely encountered simply to make it to school that afternoon (much less the trauma she continued to live with). The mother lived many miles outside of town, had multiple young children at home, and had difficulty accessing reliable transportation. She was also poor and uneducated. Though the classroom teacher was well aware of the challenges facing this mother, she never asked the mother if everything was okay, she never offered the mother a warm or welcoming smile, and she never demonstrated care or concern. She only berated. And I did nothing.

I never talked to the mother about her experience that day, but I would guess she felt embarrassed, angry, belittled, shamed, disrespected, and unwelcomed. I suspect she never wished to return to the school, and I would imagine her son's education suffered as a result. It is even possible that she was re-traumatized by the experience, as service providers can inadvertently create stressful environments which trigger emotions and memories associated with trauma (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration 2014). I never talked to the teacher either, but I suspect that had the mother been educated or wealthy, the conversation would have gone much differently (see discussions related to the differential treatment of parents in Auerbach 2012, 35; Gorski 2012, 307).

That moment was a turning point in my career. As I replayed the situation over and over again in my mind, I realized the damage of passing judgment and the consequences of my inaction.

Schools have the potential to help students and families who have experienced trauma feel safe, stable, and connected (National Child Traumatic Stress Network Schools Committee 2008; Cole et al. 2013), but for too many students and families, "schools actively contribute to their feelings of emptiness, rage, and loss" (Frank 2005, 199). I vowed to do better moving forward.

Moving Beyond Judgment

I now work as a faculty member in an educational leadership program, and I study the development of family-school partnerships. I am particularly interested in understanding how schools can develop meaningful relationships with historically marginalized families. This past spring, I had two professional experiences which, once again, challenged me to think deeper about the role judgment plays in family-school relationships, particularly for students and families who have experienced trauma.

The first experience was in a graduate course that I was teaching. The purpose of the course was to teach future building-level leaders to develop authentic partnerships with families. Authentic family-school partnerships are "respectful alliances among educators, families, and community groups that value relationship building, dialogue, and power sharing as part of socially just, democratic schools" (Auerbach 2010, 729). During one of the first class sessions, I provided students with an overview of authentic family-school partnerships, and I explained some of the benefits associated with these types of relationships. For example, I discussed how family-school partnerships have been linked to improved grade point averages, standardized test scores, school attendance, and student behavior (Henderson and Mapp 2002). I also talked about how they support the work of schools through improved school programs and more positive school climates (Epstein 2011). But beyond these benefits, I shared with students that I believed family-school partnerships represented the manner in which we should treat other people. At the end of the class session, I presented some final points for students to consider. These final points encouraged students to engage in critical self-reflection related to their beliefs about families, to adopt non-judgmental attitudes toward families, and to recognize that all families have different stories which can influence their "readiness" to engage in partnerships. Ultimately, I told students that it is our job as educators to initiate partnerships, to meet families where they are, and to continually work to connect with families even in the midst of challenges.

After my final comments, one student, who was working as a high school teacher at the time, offered a dissenting perspective. He stated:

> Listening to you talk here, I don't think right now I have the sympathy and compassion towards parents that you're expecting of educators or administrators right now. I have the sympathy and compassion toward the *students* and I will always do what I think is right for the student in the learning process…. I'm reading your final points. Right now I don't agree with all of them, because I feel that's part of the problem with our education system right now is that we should expect more from our parents than we do…. I'm game for listening as we go through this process, but I'm not completely on board with everything that's being said right now.

I was glad the student was willing to openly challenge my perspective. He was likely not the only student who questioned my philosophy on families – many educators are reluctant to develop partnerships with families, particularly families from poor, diverse backgrounds

(Auerbach 2012; Blackmore and Hutchison 2010). While I appreciated his candor, I also remember thinking "*at what age do educators stop caring about people?*" In this moment, I grasped the magnitude of the challenge facing our field. What I originally thought was an issue of limited perspective-taking, I began to recognize as problematic ideology. Unfortunately, many educators have been socialized to misunderstand disparities that can contribute to parental involvement (Gorski 2012; Patterson, Hale, and Stessman 2007). As a result, educators often stereotype and blame parents (particularly poor, minority parents) for their perceived "deficiencies" (i.e., deficit ideology; Gorski 2008, 138) rather than considering "the context of structural injustice and the unequal distribution of access and opportunities" (i.e., structural ideology; Gorski 2016, 379). As educators, if we want to move away from the judgment of families, then we have to move away from ideological perspectives that rationalize and defend the disenfranchisement of others.

My second perspective-changing experience occurred while collecting data for a new study. The purpose of the study was to examine the school experiences of parents with drug and alcohol addictions in order to gain insights and perspectives from these experiences that would help schools develop improved family-school partnerships. Data collection for this study involved multiple interviews with parents who had drug and alcohol addictions. During the interviews, I asked participants to describe their experiences with K-12 schools, both as a child and as a parent, and to offer recommendations for schools on how they might better support families experiencing addictions. Once again, I found myself hearing story after story of childhood trauma accompanied by feelings of shame and isolation.

It was the story of one man that notably pushed my thinking about judgment and its impact on children and families who have experienced trauma. As a child, this man experienced complex trauma. Complex trauma involves exposure to multiple traumatic events that begin early in life, persist over a prolonged period of time, and are often related to close, interpersonal relationships (Bath 2008). His mother was an alcoholic. He routinely witnessed the brutal beating of his mother at the hands of her boyfriend, and he understood what it was like to feel hungry, dirty, and unsafe. Despite the instability he experienced at home, he believed home was the only place he belonged. Throughout our interview, he described experiencing a sort of "identity crisis" as a child. On the one hand, he resented his mother for the choices she made and the harm that it caused him. But on the other hand, he felt connected to her and her social network in a way that he did not feel connected at school. He described feeling "out of place" at school and fully aware that he was "different" than his teachers and peers. Ultimately, he believed there was a clear division between his family and the school, and to function in school, he would have to "sellout."

This man's story reiterated for me the importance of working to connect with *all* families. No child should have to feel that he must "give up" the only identity he knows in order to succeed at school. No child should have to feel like he must choose between his mother and teachers. No child should have to feel that his trauma makes it impossible for him to belong at school. Unfortunately, deficit perspectives of families, accompanied by actions that serve to "other" marginalized families, only perpetuate these feelings and further traumatize students and families (see discussion of sociopolitical trauma in Quiros and Berger 2015).

From Judgment to Compassion

The rhetoric of non-judgmental schools is easy to embrace. But the reality is, sometimes it is difficult *not* to pass judgment. When educators see students hurting and know that their families played a role in the hurt, it is difficult to remain non-judgmental. But as educators, it is important that we honestly recognize and address this challenge. When we are honest, it allows us to examine the assumptions we make about families, to consider how our own childhood experiences shape our beliefs about parents and families, and to engage in practices which can help us better understand and connect with families. Ultimately, honesty allows us to engage in critical self-reflection, and it is through critical self-reflection that we can begin to recognize our own areas of needed improvement. Example questions I have used to guide my own critical self-reflection include: *What do I wish families understood about my job?*; *What do I wish families would do differently to support their students?*; *Why do I think it is sometimes challenging for families and schools to work together?*; and, *What messages do I send families (either explicitly or implicitly) about their value?*

It is also important that educators intentionally attend to the stories of students and families. Every person and every family has a story. Our stories reflect the opportunities we have been given, the relationships we have with others, and the manner in which we interact with the world around us. As educators, we must bear witness to these stories – particularly those that involve trauma. As Laura (2014) states:

> In each of us there is a desire to be known and felt, to be acknowledged and validated, and to have our histories confirmed….Witnessing, as an act of love, involves a deliberate attendance to people, seeing and taking notice of that which they believe is meaningful. Fears and desires are situated in a sense of past and future, and experiences become the fabric of time and space. To witness is to validate the existence of stories, and to protect their places in the world…. At a minimum, bearing witness to the pain of other people who are significant is the act of validating and advancing their fundamental rights to peace, fairness, and humanity. (77-78)

Educators can learn about families' stories by developing cultural memoirs, using photographs to explore families' histories, creating family keepsakes, completing funds of knowledge projects, and developing family genograms (for descriptions of these activities see Allen 2007; Berryhill and Vennum 2015; Kottler 2004). As an additional benefit, each of these activities can be infused within existing curriculum to support student academic learning.

The key for educators is carefully considering where, when, and how to utilize these tools. The sharing of personal stories is an intimate act. For students and families who have experienced trauma, soliciting familial stories could trigger emotions and memories associated with trauma. It is essential that educators are aware of and responsive to the unique needs of trauma survivors when soliciting families' stories, particularly regarding trust, safety, and social connectedness (see Missouri Department of Social Services Children's Division and The Full Frame Initiative 2016). When educators recognize the vulnerability associated with sharing one's story and are purposely committed to relieving the anxiety associated with this vulnerability, it can "create a very intense, meaningful social bond" between educators, students, and families (Bryk and Schneider 2002, 20).

Bearing witness to the stories of families helps us recognize that choices are not made in isolation. Families make choices based on the opportunities given to them, the sociopolitical contexts in which they live, and their knowledge and resources in a given moment. When we bear witness to families' stories, we begin to see the structural injustices they face (e.g., inadequate access to healthcare, housing, food, etc.), and we start to understand that choices are a luxury not provided to everyone. With this understanding, we begin to move away from judgment and toward compassion.

Conclusion

I am forever indebted to the many students and families with whom I have worked. They incited growth within me that never would have occurred had I not heard their stories, witnessed their struggles, and connected to their lives. My greatest regret is that I did not always do them justice. At times, I failed to provide them with the support, understanding, compassion, and advocacy they deserved. We all "walk through the 'ideological fog' of our social training, which often has not done enough to help us understand our biases so we can make an effort to control them" (Olivos 2012, 111). While I cannot undo my mistakes or recover lost opportunities, I can learn from them and help others avoid the same pitfalls.

Every day educators encounter students and families who are hurting as the result of trauma, and with each and every interaction, we make decisions that can either facilitate healing or lead to further harm. When we pass judgment on families, we make the decision to harm rather than heal. If we wish to help students move beyond trauma, then we must move beyond judgment of their families. It is by critically examining our own beliefs about students, families, and their value and by authentically witnessing their stories that we "immerse ourselves in the complexities, the difficult questions, and the messiness of transformation" (Gorski 2008, 146). In doing so, we offer hope of healing for our students and their families.

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