

## Educational Wounds

This paper considers the theme of educational wounds, a phenomenon which is not especially familiar in the literature on schooling, teaching and learning. In the UK the topic has been at the centre of two specific concerns, namely instances of institutional abuse and a network of ex-public school students who have identified with post-traumatic stress disorder as a result their experience in boarding school education. However, the purpose of the following discussion is to broaden the understanding of how education 'wounds' those engaged in schooling which is informed by social change and equality factors. First though, perhaps the main text for exploring the theme is Kirsten Olson's *Wounded by School* (2009). In her extensive research Olson presents a critique of schooling, identifies specific kinds of wounds and a 'manifesto' for an alternative, joyful learning approach.

### **Wounded by School (Olson, 2009)**

Olson identifies seven kinds of wounds, each one of which generates a different sense of student alienation. Olson's main criticism of schooling relations is that alienation eliminates the possibility of joy in learning. School wounds are described as:

- Everyday losses of pleasure in learning
- Belief that we are not smart, not competent in learning
- Belief that our abilities are fixed, and cannot be improved with effort, coaching, intervention or self-understanding
- Belief that we are 'just average' in ways that feel diminishing
- Painful, burning memories of shaming experiences in school that produce generalised anxiety and shut us down
- Chronic, habitual anger toward teachers and those in authority, experiences in school
- Over-attachment to 'right answers', correctness
- Tendency to classify others, and ourselves, into dualistic, diminishing 'smart/dumb', 'artistic/not artistic' categories
- Unprocessed, powerful feelings about education and learning that we become aware of as adults, in our interactions with our own children or students in school

What Olson refers to as a 'taxonomy' of wounds is intended to encourage individuals to think about what parts of themselves they may have been alienated from or what they experience as 'lost'.

### *Wounds of creativity*

- Belief that our unusual or novel ideas or capacities lack value, or are too weird, too strange
- Sense that everything we do has to 'add up to something' useful or explicable
- Judgmental internal voices that tell us: Who do you think you are to try that? You're no good at that - you can't be successful at that.

- Blaming internal voices that say: 'You haven't worked hard enough at that for it to be of value or to make sense'
- Denial of what we are passionate about, or for what we have affinity, in favour of what's conventionally expected
- Denying our inner compass about what is valuable, what our vocation is, what we have to add to the world

### *Wounds of compliance*

- Feeling that obeying the rules, especially in school, is of paramount importance for approval, for acceptance
- Feeling that we will be rewarded only if we obey the rules, even if the rules seem unfair, unjust, or diminishing
- Fear of being punished for sticking out: 'The nail that rises above will be hammered down'.
- Feeling of dislocation from ourselves due to institutional expectations: 'I learned that the rules of school were wrong, but I still had to go by them'
- Overreliance on external rewards for motivation: 'I took this course only because it would look good on my transcript/CV'

### *Wounds of rebelliousness*

- Sense that the only way to protect oneself is to rebel, to object
- In response to being unsuccessful, or being told we are not worthy in school, fighting, acting out, becoming hostile
- Inflexibility in taking another's point of view; being flooded by one's own sense of anger and injustice
- Fighting or 'acting out', which is learned as an adaptive response, that becomes fixed and maladaptive, and self-destructive

### *Wounds that numb*

- Loss of feeling around learning: numbness, being zoned-out; diminishment of vitality around learning
- Feeling detached from learning events; just going through the motions
- Losing interest in learning experiences you once enjoyed
- Loss of learning ambition, not much courage or bravery in the face of learning difficulty

### *Wounds of underestimation*

- Sense we are not fully seen or valued in school due to our social class standing, race, ethnicity, cultural background, gender

- Sense that assumptions are being made about us based on identity issues.
- Learning outcomes constructed to confirm rightness of these assumptions
- Outright denial of access to learning due to assumptions made about the learner
- Difficulty in naming of underestimation wounds, sense that underestimation is normal, the way it is and that no other way is possible

#### *Wounds of perfectionism*

- Sense of what we have done is never enough
- Being activated by whatever the next goal is, always wanting to achieve 'the best' or 'the most'
- Fragility around failure; sense that failure of making a mistake will lead to catastrophe; feeling that any failure is a permanent blot on our record
- Alienation from our own learning lives due to excessive attention to the goals of others
- Unwillingness to take risks in learning due to fear of mistakes
- Lack of pleasure in learning due to fear of failure

#### *Wounds of the average*

- Belief that we can only do so much, based on inappropriate testing or tracking at school
- Idea that our abilities are fixed and can't be improved through exceptional effort or focus
- Suppressed ambition and self-discipline due to our own low expectations of ourselves and those mirrored in our school environment
- Denial of our capacities, both internally and externally
- Feeling unseen, unknown, undersold in school
- Not being very interested in ourselves

Having presented the alienating educational wounds, Olson proposes that the 'antidote' is the installation of students' joy and autonomy. She does this in the form of a manifesto:

#### **A Learner's Bill of Rights**

Every learner has the right to know why they are learning something, why it is important now, or may be important to them someday.

Every learner has the right to engage in questioning or interrogating the idea of "importance".

Every learner has the right to be confused and to express this confusion openly, honestly, and without shame.

Every learner has the right to multiple paths to understanding a concept, an idea, a set of facts, or a series of constructs.

Every learner has the right to understand his or her own mind, brain wiring, and intellectual inclinations as completely as possible.

Every learner has the right to interrogate and question the means through which his or her learning is assessed.

Every learner is entitled to some privacy in their imagination and thoughts.

Every learner has the right to take their own imagination and thinking seriously.

### **Commentary**

My interest in highlighting Olson's work is to dig more deeply into the experience of alienation that is associated with schooling. This in turn connects with ideas about alienation described by some writers in the TA community, including Claude Steiner. One way in which this topic has been discussed in TA is via the following formula:

Oppression + mystification = alienation (where alienation is disconnection from capacity to think, possibility of joy and love)

Conversely;

Oppression + de-mystification = anger which if not met with empathy leads to violence

Oppression + de-mystification = anger which if met with empathy and understanding leads to action, and subsequently, liberation

In educational terms, Olson's 'wounds' can be understood as component parts of the 'mystification' in the schooling experience. Given that alienation is also useful in the context of diversity work I am interested in the cross-over between educational wounds and aspects of identity, eg. Race, gender, class, etc. For example, Olson refers to some of these factors in her description of the wound of under-estimation. However, I am curious as to whether other wounds 'speak' to the field of diversity, equality and inclusion.

### *DEI & Educational Wounds*

Olson does not set out to explore the cultural, equality and diversity implications of the wounds taxonomy. However, if alienation is a feature, or impact of oppression it would follow that in the educational context this is likely to take the form of particular wounding. One initial response is that the phenomenon of internalised oppression means that each wound can be activated by an individual due to broader systemic factors in addition to direct specific teacher-student dynamics.