

Transforming the Shame of Early School Difficulties

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In 1985 I was hired to create an adult literacy program as a service of six collaborating library systems located just south of San Francisco, California, as part of an innovative initiative of the State Library called the California Literacy Campaign. Although I had extensive background creating innovative educational programs and student support services at the college level and in communities, this was a new adventure. I was fascinated by the individuals who came out of hiding to seek tutoring for their reading and writing difficulties as adults.

Over the next fourteen years, I listened to many adults tell painful stories of their early school years as they fell behind their peers and struggled to learn to read and write. I found they had a rich mix of talents and creativity, yet thought of themselves as stupid because of their reading difficulties. While they were often successful working adults, their gifts had often been ignored or dismissed during their school years.

As I came to know many of these learners over the years, I began to sense a deep, hidden wound. While adult education research and literature often refers to low self-esteem observed and reported by adult literacy students, little educational research has been done to look at the underlying emotional dynamics that cause low self-esteem or provide effective strategies for educators to use to address the harm caused by persistent school failure. As I listened to the learners, I was struck by how often they talked about the *pain and shame* they endured in school. Despite the significant successes that I saw these learners achieve in their literacy skills and work lives, I also noticed they often would introduce themselves as poor readers or nonreaders. I was perplexed by this mismatch between perception of self (identity) and the reality of success. Listening to their own words led me to focus my doctoral research on the effects of shame on learning -- to understand how early school difficulties and the emotional impact of long-term humiliation and failure in childhood shapes a person's sense of self.

As I studied the psychological research on shame, I began to see how the persistent shame of failure in school at an early age causes enormous harm to the entire self system -- not only to self-esteem (how one feels about oneself), but also to a person's self-image (identity), feelings of competence (or incompetence), and sense of belonging (or lack of belonging). All four aspects of the self-system are harmed by the daily exposure of a child's inability to read well in front of his or her peers. *The definition of shame, in its simplest form, is the exposure of a weakness or failure to measure up to any family or cultural norm.* In a society that states that every child should read by third grade, those who fall behind suffer daily humiliation in front of others. I found that this ongoing exposure, repeated every day for many years, leads to irreparable harm by the end of second grade, before children have the cognitive skills to understand that learning to read is only a small part of what it means to be a successful human being.¹ Shame research explains how persistent failure overtakes identity and leads a person to think that one is flawed as a human being. The feeling of shame is so uncomfortable and disturbing that children develop coping mechanisms to avoid or deflect the ongoing torment, including hiding, running away from school, giving up, or attacking themselves or others. It is

¹ Leslie Shelton, *The Heart of Literacy: Transforming School-Induced Shame and Recovering the Competent Self*. Cincinnati, OH: Union Institute and University, unpublished dissertation, 2001.

now believed by most shame researchers that bullying and other acts of violence all have shame as the underlying trigger. The harm caused in childhood persists into adulthood and continues to eat at the soul, undermining learning and well-being. The journey begins at the school door.

School Days: From Excitement to Unending Torment

When a child first enters the formal school experience of first grade at the age of six, she steps across an invisible threshold, moving from the relative safety of childhood and comfort of family into a strange new world of people, rules, expectations and social norms. From a mythic perspective, this passage from the carefree days of childhood into the structured ways of school becomes an experience of initiation, although it passes unrecognized as such in our modern world. All initiations involve a breaking or severing of some kind, whether physical, emotional, or spiritual. Usually they entail a kind of symbolic death and resurrection – a letting go of the old so new parts of the self can grow and emerge. This is certainly true for the child as he enters school -- one of the first major experiences of breaking away and moving into one's individuality. The test of one's measure as a human being begins to be tallied.

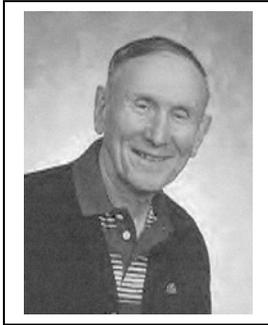
From this perspective, walking through the schoolhouse door is the first step on the path of the great adventure of life. It is a time full of promise and possibility surrounded by anticipation and excitement. While the newness of the experience may be tempered by the uncertainty of what lies ahead, children, nevertheless, come to school full of hope and curiosity. Here, at the age of six, they face an eternity of twelve years – double their life span so far – in which they are expected to develop their gifts and talents, form lasting friendships, gain the skills they need to be successful in life, and prepare to pursue a career. They enter school as children and leave as young adults. Even in first grade the child understands that this is where dreams are shaped and the foundation of one's life path is laid. The possibilities and expectations are enormous.

Children come to school expecting to succeed – not fail. If you visit a first grade classroom, you will find a room full of energy and excitement. There is a sweetness in the children, a kind of precious innocence. The ten adults who participated in my study began their school experiences this way – full of hope, excitement, and anticipation.

Archie: The first day of school was the most fun of the whole time in kindergarten. We colored, we played games, and I was right in the middle of everything. I could count to a hundred. I could say nursery rhymes and the alphabet before I started school. Everybody thought I was going to do well in school. I was taught these things by my two older sisters. Towards the end of the year, the first grade teacher came to the kindergarten room and she called individuals over, talked to us, and asked us questions. When it came to my turn, I knew everything she asked me.

When I started in first grade, I guess based on that horrible test, I was in the number one group. But it didn't take long and I was in the B group or the C group, and then I was classified in the bottom of the class. I don't know – I guess I was just looked at as someone who just didn't want to try or didn't want to learn, so I was placed in the back of the room and I wasn't called upon. I wasn't even asked to turn in a paper and I sat there for all of first grade. When I went to

second grade the teacher automatically must have gotten information from what the other teacher had told her, so I was placed in the back of the room on that day and that went on until the sixth grade. One day in gym class, why the coach had us run a race, and I won the race. I was the fastest and they got excited about my athletics. But sitting back there by myself, it was it was like being – nobody talked to you – and it was like being in solitary (confinement). And the kids said things to me and they hurt. But the things they didn't say hurt the most.



The pain of Archie's experience is palpable and unbearable, yet it continues to be repeated over and over, year after year for children with reading and writing difficulties. When children first enter school, they are vulnerable and insecure until they begin to experience safety and success. If they never come to feel safe or successful, their internal sense of self is exposed and open to damage. In the first three grades children do not have the cognitive self-reflection skills to understand what is happening to them as they struggle to learn to read. The experience of failure is emotionally devastating and is associated with their whole self, not just one aspect of their cognitive skills.

Even though Archie is now an adult, the damage caused by his early struggles in school scarred his adult life until he was able to admit his reading difficulties at the age of 56 and find individualized tutoring help. His story is a universal one repeated with individual variations by each of the research participants and echoed by thousands of adult learners that I have come to know over the course my work as a literacy educator. These adults entered their early school experiences feeling successful; they were bright, capable and eager learners prior to school and during kindergarten. Then, ever so slowly, their excitement turned to embarrassment, then humiliation, and eventually pervasive shame. A wave of discomfort washed over them when they read aloud daily; spelling tests became a weekly demonstration of failure. They applied their creativity to developing ways to cope, disappear, become invisible, run away and hide. The daily humiliation became an unending torment, and the effects of the language processing difficulties spread like a cancer across all of their school experience. Dreams of a future full of possibilities descended into a struggle for survival.

The wound is unspoken and unrecognized because it is a wound to the spirit caused by the exposure of a flaw made visible to all. Children with reading problems come to believe they are defective at their core as human beings, and this belief is not a rationale thought, but a felt sense. School-induced shame creates an educational wound that diminishes a person's feelings of self-efficacy and competence. It robs the individual of a sense of personal power, destroys feelings of self-worth, and distorts identity.

While these effects are visible in how a child behaves in school and in later life, they are usually lumped together and described simply as the result of "low self-esteem" and left at that. Little attention has been paid to the real and deeply painful devastation that these learners experience in the core self or to the underlying psychological dynamics of the wound. It is not a wound created by poor parenting or early developmental problems in the home, but, instead, is generated in the early school environment where it is unrecognized or ignored. Attention continues to be devoted primarily to instructional content – emphasizing improvement in academic performance, especially reading and math, and identifying cognitive learning problems by isolating and labeling children as learning disabled.

As the director of the adult literacy program I witnessed the symptoms of this wound in the low self-esteem and tearful stories over many years, yet we did not deal with these feelings

directly except through the provision of a caring tutoring relationship that was open and non-judgmental. While the field may acknowledge the role of emotions in the learning process, little practical study and training have been offered to address the emotional impact of shame, rage, and other harmful emotions in adult learning environments.

While the purpose of my research was to understand the cause of such harm, the overarching goal of my doctoral program was focused on the study of transformation in adulthood, including processes that support transformative learning, so that I could develop curriculum that enables adult learners transform their lives. In order to regain a sense of wholeness lost in childhood one must first become aware of the beliefs, perceptions, and assumptions of “self and other” acquired during the early school years. Faulty perceptions distort these learners’ sense of identity and constrict their ability to realize their full potential – their ability to effectively bring their gifts and talents into the world as adults. In the course of my doctoral work, I developed a six-week course called *The Journey to Wholeness*© to test a transformative learning model to help the adult learners regain a sense of balance and wholeness.