

## School-Induced Shame: Research Overview

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### The Struggle to Survive

One of the participants in the study, Patty, provided a graphic example of the power of experience to create images, and how those images then shape beliefs about oneself and life. During my interview with her and her tutor, she suddenly goes off on a tangent talking about *Humpty Dumpty's Great Fall!*



“All the king’s horses and all the king’s men couldn’t put Humpty together again.” Now what kind of image do think that would leave in a kid’s mind? *OK. if you fall down and get hurt, nobody’s going to be able to help you.* (My emphasis) That’s my image of that... So, from the time you’re little it’s pretty much said, “You are going to have to make it on your own.” This is just a concept I have. OK, granted it took me 40 years to come to this. But you think about it, ok. “If you don’t do good in school, you’re not going to be accepted. If you don’t graduate and go to college, you’re not going to be able to get a good job.” All this negative stuff goin’ on in your life from day one. “If you don’t do your homework, you’re not goin’ to pass this class.” Well why – just because I couldn’t do the homework? ...What is perceived to me, ok, from day one is, “You need to stand on your own two feet alone.” And that’s the way it goes. You fail and nobody’s going to want anything to do with you.

For Patty that image of Humpty Dumpty broken into a thousand pieces captures the message that she held throughout her childhood school experiences – *if you fall down and are broken, you can never be put back together again. Even though you may be broken, you have to stand on your own two feet – alone.*

This captures the essence of the internal scripts that most of the study participants developed when they were not able to master reading and writing in school. “There is no help and no one cares and you have failed. But we are going to penalize you by making you stay after school and do what it is you cannot do, over and over and over for fourteen years until you finally get it. And if you don’t get it, it’s proof there’s something wrong with you. You are broken and we cannot fix you.” These are the internal messages that form the ingredients that combine to create an endless torment of failure, futility, hopelessness and no escape that the study participants endured throughout their school years.

The seeds of shame, sown by the daily experiences of failure and not measuring up in school, grow in the minds, emotions, and souls of the participants when they are young – just beginning to discover their potential and form their identities. As Sandra Edelman (1998) realizes in her reflection on shame as an encounter with the dark side of the divine, the shame of illiteracy plants seeds that can lead to either transformation or psychosis. These stories of the research participants, as they unfold, describe journeys of unending internal pain that begin in school and follow the learners throughout their lives until they are able to mend (if ever) what is broken – their hearts and spirits – and find ways to become whole again.

School itself becomes a kind of hell – a virtual prison with no escape (except for running away or dropping out) and the joy of learning descends into a struggle to survive, where the name of the game is damage control – to just lay low until you can get through the ordeal and get on with life after school. The learners persist to exist. Overall, the ten individuals who participated in my study are “survivors.” They made it and are successful, for the most part, in their lives and careers today. Despite this success, they often discount their accomplishments and continue to view themselves as “less than” others, carrying invisible wounds to all aspects of the self system, their inner world (psyche) as well as their sense of identity, competence, self-worth, and belonging.

### **Research Findings**

*Illiteracy is an example of a learning deficit about which there is considerable shame. Adults who have not learned how to read and write feel acute shame over their deficiency. When faced with situations likely to expose their illiteracy, they will hide it because hiding is a natural response to shame. Exposure is the essence of shame. And shame experienced over illiteracy often matches, in intensity, the shame experienced over incest (Kaufman, 1992, 199).*

The most compelling themes of the study emerge in childhood but carry into adulthood.

- **The shame of poor school performance is impotence-making – it blocks the development of self-efficacy, diminishes feelings of competence, and distorts self-image.** The early compromise of the child’s self-efficacy and the persistent amplification of the “incompetent self” during the early school years leads the participants to perceive themselves as fakes, imposters, or cons as adults. They disown or dismiss their own competence and credit the successes that they’ve had throughout long careers of demonstrated competence to luck, charm, or fate. While they may be able to take credit for specific skills or talents that they possess, most do not view themselves as masters of their own destiny. Feelings of competence are continually compromised by past shame scenes of failure.
- **The school experience is one of constant inner and outer torment at the hands of others and themselves.** The unending pain of these years is nearly unbearable and continues to be triggered throughout their lives. This leads to feelings of diminished self-worth, difficulty trusting others as well as themselves, and difficulty forming close relationships.
- **Even as they move into adulthood, the fear of exposure of their reading or writing difficulties follows them like a shadow.** Their experience is one of both “no escape” and “no win.” No escape because the problem is always with them, they never completely solve it. Even if they read better, they still struggle to spell and write. This is then proof that they will never catch up to the rest of the “reading world.” Add to this the paradox that when they do reveal they need help to read or spell something, no one believes them because others view them as capable. Or the opposite can happen, they are demeaned or humiliated by teachers, other students, and co-workers when adults. This creates a double bind. “I’m smart, but I’m dumb. But I know I’m not dumb.”

- **Emotion is the master over cognition.** Even with all the therapy that some undergo as adults, even though on the one hand they “know” that they are successful and capable in certain areas of their lives, as soon a situation exposes their weakness, it triggers the shame affect; and they are right back in first grade reliving the terror of their failures and feeling like there is nowhere to run or hide.
- **The feelings of shame generalize across the entire experience,** disturbing the core self and amplifying feelings of failure and incompetence, which spread like a cancer throughout all of their school experiences and later lives. This is a trademark of the shame affect at work.
- **Learning strengths and ways of knowing are often dismissed, controlled or unrecognized.** Many of the learners are highly kinesthetic, spatial and socially smart persons. None of these intelligences are involved in the ways that reading and writing are taught. They are often penalized or made fun of for “talking too much, doodling, day dreaming, not paying attention, and not being able to sit still.”
- **Despite all their difficulties, the essence of the spirit of each individual shines through in the end.** Living with the shame of poor literacy skills in childhood is like a refining fire, for this group of “survivors” it burns away pretense and self-importance and brings out their compassion, strengths of character, and connection to the greater whole.

### **Impact of Shame on the Self System**

I have developed a chart on the following page to demonstrate how these experiences, feelings, and perceptions coalesce to affect sense of self. When Kaufman describes the impact of long-term shame on the self system, he notes that it disturbs not only the core self (psyche), but all aspects of the developing personality – identity, self-worth, and belonging (1992, xvi). I have added self-efficacy / competence to this list for two reasons. First, Nathanson makes clear in his writing on shame that developing mastery of almost any task and the resulting sense of competence are the cornerstones of feeling good about oneself, which he calls healthy pride (1992, 160). On the other hand, continued failure and heightened feelings of incompetence lead to a spiral of shame.

Secondly, while most shame researchers tend to focus on the way that shame disturbs self-worth and identity, it appears that the experience of continued difficulty and failure to learn to read in the first few years of school has the most profound impact on the child’s feelings of *competence and confidence*. School shame does the most damage to this aspect of self, which then corrupts all other components of the self system. As Kaufman noted when discussing the shame of learning disabilities, to be seen as stupid is the ultimate curse in this culture that is so focused on intelligence and outer performance. He observes that the stigma of illiteracy is as destructive as the stigma of incest (1992, 199). The learners feel as though everyone can see their struggle to read – their incompetence is visible to all.

## Competence and Success vs. Incompetence and Failure

Although most of the adult learners who participated in my research attended school before the advent of identifying children as learning disabled, five of the ten were pulled out of regular classes and placed in special education classes with developmentally disabled children, which caused further humiliation and identified them as “retarded” in the eyes of their peers and themselves. The stigma of being seen in this way added to the shame experienced when their inability to read well was exposed in front of their peers. While many educators, especially special education teachers, see the identification of children as “learning disabled” as a benefit to the child, there is also a stigma attached to this. Kaufman describes the effect of this, saying:

Children who are learning disabled learn all too quickly that they are not merely different than their peers but deficient. They are marked as lesser by their peers and by our schools, one of the principal institutions through which cultural values and taboos are transmitted (ibid).

These stigmas and the ongoing situations of difficulty and failure in school undermine the child’s development of a “competent self,” which is so critical in early childhood development (Nathanson, 1992, 84). When a child or adult accomplishes something “on purpose,” he or she feels enjoyment or pleasure (one of the two positive affects) and is usually proud of the accomplishment. This is called *competence pleasure* – a term used by psychologist Francis Broucek in his 1979 journal article on “Efficacy in infancy” (ibid.) to describe these feelings of healthy pride (self-esteem). Feelings of competence are essential for the development of self-worth and a functional ego identity. Nathanson describes how efficacy shapes identity in this way:

It is fascinating to watch how competence or efficacy becomes integrated into our self-image, our personal identity. The self that can do things is my best self simply because it is the “me” most associated with excitement and joy. The competent self is the one that evokes the happiest memories ... The part of our identity associated with pride is the part we wish to show the world. That portion of us which is associated with shame must always be hidden. The joy in pride makes us public; for reasons that we have yet to determine, shame makes us private (ibid.).

Unfortunately, the failure to succeed at mastering any task triggers the shame affect, even if it is not recognized as such. The degree of intensity of the shame experience is related to factors such as the importance or value the skill or quality has in society, the importance of those who have observed the lack of mastery or perceived deficit, and whether one is publicly humiliated (Kaufman, 1992,10). However, as described in the previous chapter on the dynamics of shame, even the simplest or most minor failures lead to the formation of a separate part of the self that is seen as an “incompetent self” (Nathanson, 210). The cumulative effect of memories associated with either the positive affect of joy connected to competence or the negative affect of shame connected to incompetence make up the complex mixture of how we see and feel about ourselves. Nathanson describes this composite image of ourselves as follows:

All of our actions are capable of being viewed along a shame/pride axis, a yardstick along which we measure our every activity. By this shame/pride axis we decide

whether we have come closer to our hoped-for personal best or to our dreaded personal worst... To the extent that we have grown to maturity in an atmosphere of incompetence and failure or have come to believe that our true self is a defective self, we have formed a personal identity based more on shame than pride (86).

Although each research participant’s experience in school was unique, it is my observation that the adults who participated in this study and those who attended the adult literacy program that I managed all have a much larger reservoir of school memories attached to shame than those attached to success. This may explain why any successes in school do not manage to mitigate the impact of the pervasive shame associated with their reading and writing difficulties.

I found that even if they experienced success in some other academic area such as sports, art or drama, they view that success as specific and limited. It becomes an isolated, abnormal experience compared to the “normal” enduring feelings of the struggle to read and academic failure that tell them that they are incompetent as learners. Their identity is overtaken by their sense of incompetence. Just as a physical injury, when continually re-injured, gets exponentially worse and begins to affect the entire body as it tries to compensate, so does ongoing and pervasive school shame amplify and overtake the person’s entire sense of self.

### Impact of School Shame on the Self System

<i>Aspect of Self</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Core Questions</i>	<i>Learners’ Beliefs</i>
<b>IDENTITY</b>	Perceptions of self, one’s self-image.	Who am I in the world?	I am not who I appear to be. I’m a fake, con, imposter.
<b>SELF-WORTH</b>	Feelings about the self.	How do I matter?	I am less than all others. I don’t measure up. I don’t matter.
<b>EFFICACY</b>	Sense of personal power – feeling able to act on one’s own behalf	How do I bring my talents into the world?  How can I make a difference?	I tried and tried. No matter what I did I couldn’t catch up. I’m not in charge of my life. It just happened.
<b>BELONGING/INTIMACY</b>	Ability to form open, trusting relationships.	Where do I belong? How do I belong?	I am different. I don’t belong anywhere. I can’t trust others.

References:

Kauffman, Gershen. *Shame: The Power of Caring*. Rochester, VT: Schenkman Books, Inc., 1992.

Nathanson, Donald L. *Shame and Pride: Affect, Sex, and the Birth of the Self*. New York: W.W. Norton and Co., 1992.