

Wisdom in the Wound: The Doorway to Change

Explaining Soul-Level Impoverishment in Learning

Dr. Shannon H. Simonelli, Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawai'i at Manoa
February 2003, Edited version July 2003

Overview

While teachers express that they feel burned-out, over-burdened, and under-appreciated by parents, principals and school administrators, their students, conversely, are asking for more caring relationships and meaningful attention. Research shows that an emotional and meaningful attachment to teachers — derived through a demonstrated caring attitude by teachers — is a direct link to student academic achievement. (Hawkins, Catalano, et al. 1992, Solomon et al. 1992 as cited in Elias, Zins et al. 1997). Many teachers feel unprepared to meet students' social and emotional needs, which is critical to academic achievement. The education system is designed for teachers to focus on test scores and standards, unaware of the extent to which a holistic and caring presence leads to student success. This system wide unawareness sets up a breeding ground for what is termed Educational Wounding.

What is Educational Wounding?

It is the act of imposing on students our narrow and punitive definitions of “the right way to learn” and what it means to be smart. It is derived from our own fears, frustrations, beliefs, and attitudes, which can be unconscious and unintentional. Teachers, parents, and students in general are not encouraged to develop solutions that are holistic or that address the whole Self. Research into this issue has yielded personal stories and imagery leading to the naming of this cluster of experiences as Educational Wounding (Simonelli, 2000).

Five themes have emerged through my research of Educational Wounding.

- **The Cult of Success** – experienced as pressure to conform with control, judgment, shaming tactics, humiliation and abuse that drive learners through a narrow definition of success, which excludes valid measures and value for multiple intelligences and personal interests.
- **The Lie** – in order to succeed we may (knowingly or unknowingly) sacrifice a deeper truth about who we are. We “lie” to others and ourselves, not achieving our unique and full potential, telling ourselves that we are stupid, or not creative, over time and into adulthood we may feel like impostors in our own lives.
- **Post-Traumatic Stress Symptoms** – after experiences of Educational Wounding we may develop a fear to take risks, have anxiety about being in school, learning, or certain new situations. We may feel we are just trying to survive, that we must over achieve to be okay, or feel tired and angry much of the time.
- **Broken Spirits, Lost Souls** – through diminishing experiences we feel unseen, disappointed, not allowed to discover and develop who we are, we experience exclusion, prejudice, inconsequence and invisibility. We are not encouraged to learn to think, we instead are trained to “give them what they want,” and trained out of our own creativity and pursuing what interests us. We may feel lost and discouraged.
- **Re-membering, Redefining, Hope** – the strength of the human spirit often times helps us to find our way, to find our own authority, connect with a higher sense of self, re-member a more whole expression of who we are, and to discover our unique and inherent genius. Some find their way through to live self-actualized lives rich in unique expression.

Case Stories

Case 1:

Mary is a 28 year-old woman working on an undergraduate degree. She tells of a kindergarten experience: “...One day in show and tell, I showed the class how my neighbor has shown me to write in

cursive. I was proud, it felt like fancy big girl writing. In front of the entire class, my teacher yelled at me — ‘you are not supposed to write in cursive until the fourth grade!’ She was really mad!” From that experience, Mary said she learned ‘Don’t flourish.’ In time I learned that it is okay to be smart, just make sure you keep it to yourself. She was Educationally Wounded for being “too smart.”

Case 2:

“After the first grade I didn’t like school anymore and felt like a dummy” reports Anthony, a 43-year-old acupuncturist and naturopath. “I believe my reading and learning problems are psychological and come from anxiety that I picked up from bad learning experiences,” says Anthony of his early Catholic school experiences. “They tried to force-feed you and humiliate you...I think that’s a crime, a very serious crime.” To this day Anthony feels tremendous anxiety in any new learning experiences and often times says he can’t pay attention to anything because of the anxiety. “[School] was more of a survival environment than a good learning environment.”

Case 3:

“It’s sorta like I disappeared,” said Ron, a 40-year-old computer software designer. In the beginning of the fourth grade, Ron said he was exuberant, bright and involved in class. He was often the first to raise his hand to answer questions. By the end of the fourth grade, Ron said he had been “trained out” of asking questions. “I don’t recall the teacher explaining to me to share with my classmates. She just stopped calling on me, and I evidently stopped raising my hand.

Ron loved his fifth grade music class, because he loved to sing. But he couldn’t match the pitch pipe, so he wasn’t allowed to sing. He and four other children had to sit on the side and watch and listen to other children sing. “I was just crushed. I couldn’t participate.” Ron eventually became depressed and withdrawn, and said he was one of three students out of 900 who didn’t have his senior photo in his high school yearbook.

Consequences

Working with Educational Wounding has made clear that many adults embody one, several or all of these themes from their own learning experiences. Professionals in the educational system are products of the educational system. Many have come to their profession because they want to participate in positive outcomes for children. However, unexamined and unconscious beliefs, attitudes, thoughts and emotions can lead to unintentional perpetuation of wounding situations not only for students but in one’s own life. “For teachers to cultivate the social, emotional, and spiritual development of students, they must simultaneously cultivate their own.” (Kessler, 1991).

“By separating emotion from logic and reason in the classroom, we’ve simplified school management and evaluation, but we’ve also then separated two sides of one coin – and lost something important in the process.” (Sylwester, 1995). The wisdom in Educational Wounding shows us that we must attend to the imaginative, artistic, physical, and spiritual selves of children in the learning process. (Simonelli, 2000). We have emotion about what we are interested in, what has heart and meaning, and things that hold our hopes, fears, and dreams. Oftentimes passion and interest have been so squelched in early learning experiences that students cannot or will not articulate what they are authentically interested in.

My research has led me to understand that, on the whole, the traditional educational system is suffering from a “soul level” impoverishment. Often times, learning is shaming, humiliating, traumatic, and disconnected from real life experiences — devoid of excitement and passion, leaving us feeling battered, isolated, and disconnected. This diminishes the development and expression of what I call the “essential self.”

When students have learning experiences that are shaming, traumatic, and painful for mind, body or spirit, it is wounding. The student may be unaware of the experience as being wounding. Regardless, these experiences accumulate in the student's body and spirit, and are stored there. Often times, it is as if a part of the student has gone away, abandoning the whole expression of self. The part that leaves often holds important keys to learning and unique expression. The wounding influences, constricts, limits and diminishes the student's potential for positive new learning, and perpetuates the cycle of learning being linked to wounding. "Brain studies show, for example, that memory is coded to specific events and linked to social and emotional situations, and that the latter are integral parts of larger units of memory that make up what we learn and retain, including what takes place in the classroom. Under conditions of real or imagined threat or high anxiety, there is a loss of focus on the learning process and a reduction in task focus and flexible problem solving. It is as if the thinking brain is taken over (or "hijacked", as Golman says) by the older limbic brain." (Elias, Zins et al. 1997).

To break this cycle the wounding requires acknowledgment. As in the Native Hawaiian healing process of Ho'oponopono, there is a process to make things right, an unwinding of the stories and feelings that are born from experiences of transgression. From a shamanic perspective, it is as if parts of the whole self are stolen away, lost, or retreat into hiding. Often times these parts hold the expression of unique richness which we were born to bring forth into the world. Wounding on this level cuts deep, and can limit a person's self perceived potential, taking them further from their personal path. Working with Educational Wounding has led to components of healing that can be incorporated into educational settings.

How to Heal Those Who Have Been Wounded

Five stages of healing have emerged through working with issues of Educational Wounding. The arts as a tool for discovery and self-expression have played a key role in both identifying the five healing stages and supporting the healing process. The five stages interrelate with indigenous approaches to healing as well as with founding principles of social/emotional learning. The healing stages are:

- ***Telling our story***—This means claiming time and space to speak about what is heavy on our hearts and minds. Incorporating this into learning experiences weaves our worlds together, creating a stronger fabric between our internal experiences and our external experiences.
- ***Re-membering our wholeness***—This is the experience of reclaiming lost parts of who we are and returning home to a fuller expression of our selves, often unlocking forgotten or hidden talents
- ***Being fully seen for who we are***—This is the experience of nonjudgment, of receiving another's full presence, of connecting with our vastness instead of our scarcity.
- ***Learning to validate our own experience***—This requires developing deep appreciation and "okay-ness" with who we are, and how we learn, create, think, and conceptualize the world and our place in it. This is associated with the skill of self-advocacy and standing up for our views, the process of becoming more real and solid in who we are becoming.
- ***Identifying and pursuing what interests us***—Interest and passion reawaken with healing, as we re-member and re-collect parts of ourselves that have been trapped or suspended in our wounded-ness, we begin to "do our being."

The outgrowth of these sequential steps leads learners to the awakening of their unique and inherent genius, allowing the expression of each learner's brilliance, born from the process of healing. These re-membered forms of expression encourage the talents, intelligences, and gifts of each person to blossom.

What should be happening

To successfully learn in ways that are interesting, relevant, and empowering, research indicates the overall success of students is tied to caring learning environments that develop the whole Self of students – intellectual, social, emotional, artistic, physical, imaginative, community minded, and nature based. (Gardner, 1993, Golman, 1995, Simonelli, 2000). Teachers need skills and supports to implement holistic strategies tied to our current system of standards based education, which contribute to improved achievement outcomes and success in the adult world for all students.

The process of creating learning environments that are healing is not simply about applying a technique, rather it is about beginning with professional staff and then with students to explore the five stages of healing as relevant to learning and to create learning environments that:

- **Are safe** – both physically and emotionally through appropriate discipline and skills to support inviting the whole self into education
- **Attend to the whole Self of teachers and students** – through peer support councils for teachers and classroom practices that address the social and emotional learning of students as relevant to academic achievement
- **Incorporate the arts** – as a tool for self expression, intellectual development, and instructional differentiation, allowing for multiple intelligences to be built upon for overall achievement
- **Value social and emotional learning** – both in the classroom and in the general school climate through policy and practice
- **Allow for interest driven, project based learning** – that addresses multiple standards and ties curriculum in a relevant way to student interests and real life experiences

Summary

Understanding the issue of Educational Wounding and its healing opens the doorway to creating learning environments that invite the whole Self through social and emotional learning activities and projects that allow students to authentically pursue what interests them. The arts play an important role in the healing process and offer a vehicle for diverse learning strategies, which foster success in learning. Ideally, education is about upliftment, discovery, empowerment and a strong resilient sense of self that is grounded in skills, talents, achievements and new learning. Understanding the dynamics of Educational Wounding and finding the wisdom in the wound offers teachers and students an opportunity to create classrooms of caring and halls of healing as the norm in our schools.

Biography

Dr. Shannon Simonelli is an Assistant Professor at the University of Hawai`i under the University Centers for Excellence in Research, Education, and Service at the Center on Disability Studies. Her work focuses on state wide school improvements. She is an educator, creative arts therapist and facilitator working with adolescents and adults in a variety of settings including secure facilities. She is an artist, dancer, day dreamer, and mother to a teenage daughter.

References

- Gardner, H. (1993). *The multiple intelligences: The theory in practice*. New York: Basic Books.
- Goleman, D. (1995). *Emotional intelligence*. New York: Bantam.
- Kessler, R. (Winter 1991). "The teaching presence." *Holistic Education Review* 4, 4: 4-15.
- Simonelli, S. (2000). *Educational wounding: An heuristic study of the diminishment of self through formal education*. Michigan: UMI.
- Sylwester, R. (1995). *A celebration of neurons: An educator's guide to the human brain*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.
- Elias, M., Sins, J., et al. (1997). *Promoting social and emotional learning: Guidelines for educators*. Alexandria, Va.: ASCD.

Copywrite Dr. Shannon Simonelli, Shannon.simonelli@cde.hawaii.edu, (808) 956-8710

Permission for reproduction for educational purposes only. Please contact me with comments.