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Olson, Kirsten (2009). *Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture*. NY: Teachers College Press

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Reviewed by Antonio L. Ellis
Howard University

During the 2009 American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting (AERA) I was fortunate to attend a session with Dr. Kirsten Olson. During her talk, her theme was “ways to recapture the joy in learning.” This lecture was an extension of her newest book entitled “Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture.” The powerful truths conveyed during this session propelled me to purchase the text. While reading the book, I realized how wounded I am from my schooling experience.

As a stutterer, I dreaded attending K-12 schools, college, and now graduate school. My entire schooling experience has been totally not pleasurable. Particularly during my K-12 years, my speech impairment caused me to suffer in the following ways: low self-esteem, humiliation, bullied, fights,

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depression, and thoughts of suicide. I was often suspended and received corporal punishment because school administrators and teachers interpreted stuttering as dishonesty. Since some teachers have personal interpretations of speech impairments, they often called on those students to participate verbally in class discussions. Lacking the ability to verbally participate in class discussions resulted in low class participation scores, which negatively impacted my overall grade point average (G.P.A.). The attitudes and perceptions of listeners regarding people with communication disorders have long been of interest to speech and language pathologists (see Overby, Carrell & Bernthal, 2007). Over the last 50 years, the general consensus has been that people with speech and language disorders are disadvantaged both socially and academically.

Even though I knew I had the intelligence to hold a position as a student officer in primary and secondary school, I never was motivated to run for student government positions. All positions required students to be able to communicate their candidacy verbally; therefore, I was hesitant to run for an election.

I purposely arrived late or did not attend class on the first day of every class in order to avoid humiliation. Normally, on the first day of class, teachers would require every student to verbally introduce themselves. These particular experiences are petrifying and humiliating for students with speech or language impairments. Personally, I remember times when I would hide out in the school restroom until I felt the time for introductions had passed. After communicating with others, I learned that I was not alone in this behavior. I learned that I was not alone in this behavior.

This type of behavior continues beyond grade school. At conferences, meetings, college class sessions, or any other first time gatherings, the facilitator typically request that everyone verbally introduce themselves. This act is an assumption that every person present has the ability to verbally articulate.

Speech and Language Impaired (SLI) children have increased difficulty interacting successfully with peers. These difficulties are often seen in the toddler and preschool years, as SLI children are susceptible to frequent misinterpretation. Furthermore, they can often be observed with concomitant immaturity in interpersonal behavioral strategies. They often react impulsively, by either acting physically intrusive or withdrawing from the interaction, which may lead to a reinforced pattern of behavior (McCabe & Meller, 2004). In order to personify this text, Olson does a vast array of diverse interviews ranging from K-12 students, parents of students, university students, and careered persons. In chapter two she dismantled the numerous types of wounds that students are inherent from traditional school culture. In light of my experiences, “wounds of underestimation” highlighted in this chapter stood out the most. An unidentified interviewee testified of their first encounter with tracking at the third-grade level. The student says:

I can remember my first experience with tracking. It was in third grade. After lunch our class had reading time. Reading time originally was conducted with the entire class and all the students took turns reading out aloud. One day Mrs. Par explained that we would be broken into groups. Mrs. Par called my name and explained that I would be going to another classroom for reading group. I quickly realized I was being put into the group with the slow-reading, stuttering kids that I thought were stupid. This group was a collection of all the minority-working class students. I said to Mrs. Par, ‘I don’t want to be with the dumb kids.’ I was immediately raced out of the room and scolded for making the other children feel bad. But no one did anything about my self-esteem. So I was now tracked into the lowest group, where my academic self-concept still remains to some degree. (p. 45)

Although this is an experience of one student, I argue this is a phenomenon that represents how speech or language (stuttering) students are viewed and interpreted. The U.S. Department of Education and Regulations (2006) define

Speech or Language Impairment as a “[c]ommunication disorder, such as stuttering, impaired articulation, a language impairment, or voice impairment, that adversely affects a child’s educational performance.”

As a stutterer, I am concerned that educational policy makers would disseminate that definition for speech or language impaired students. I contend that being speech or language impaired itself does not adversely affect a child’s educational performance. Instead, it is the school climate, culture, and how educators respond to speech or language impaired students that affect their educational performance. For example, my stuttering did not cause me to fail the third and fifth grades. However, because teachers made the classroom environment unwelcoming, I did everything to avoid coming to school. As a result I missed out on a days of valuable instruction. Therefore my educational performance was adversely affected. Although there is a major shortage of empirical data on this subject, it has been hinted that the way educators view speech or language impaired K-12 students are similar to how employers view them during adulthood.

Stuttering (fluency disorder) has been the area of speech impairment that has been most often related to employment. Hurst and Cooper (1983) found 85% of employers felt stuttering decreased a person’s employability and opportunities for promotion and share a widely accepted impression that individuals who stutter are nervous, shy, quiet, self-conscious, withdrawn, tense, anxious, fearful, reticent, and guarded.

This book was very inspiring and has started my healing process. I am grateful that the author did not only expose school culture, but also offered varies ways for wounded persons to heal. She emphasize that the educational community can create caring school communities, and that teachers, parents, and students themselves can and should advocate for changes necessary to make schooling more meaningful, joyful, and engaging.

As a doctoral student in the field of educational policy, my way of healing is to ensure that less students are wounded, particularly those who cannot speak aloud for themselves, and has lost courage to write about their experiences. Too frequently educators, parents, and policymakers fail to listen to the voices of students – the most essential voices in our education system. Readers of this text will discover ways to broaden their definitions of “voice.” Voice is also displayed by way of silence and multiple indicative behaviors. It is imperative that educational stakeholders discover ways to listen with their eyes, hearts, and moral intuition.

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About the Reviewer

Antonio L. Ellis is a doctoral student in Urban Educational Administration and Policy at Howard University. He holds both a Masters in Religious Studies and Masters in Educational Policy. His research interests are Critical Race Theory in Education and Minority Representation in the Special Education spectrum. He is an emerging scholar and is adding to the body of knowledge in the field of education. Antonio loves children and finds joy in acquiring information that benefits student achievement. He can be reached via email at Antonio.ellis@howard.edu.



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Editors

Gene V Glass

glass@edrev.info

Gustavo Fischman

fischman@edrev.info

Melissa Cast-Brede

cast-brede@edrev.info
