

# *Wounded by School*

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- *Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture*
- by Kirsten Olson
- 2009 - Teachers College Press: New York, NY
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# Who is Kirstin Olson?

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- Kirstin is a writer, an educational consultant, a national-level *Courage To Teach Facilitator*, and principal of *Old Sow Consulting*. She has consulted for the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Kennedy School at Harvard, and many large public school systems and charter schools. In this book she shares stories of many interviews of students and former students that revealed to her how schooling has wounded them. She describes the wounds, looks into why schools wound students in the first place. She devotes the second half to how students can heal and avoid wounds in the first place. Teachers who read this are less likely to wound, and the wounded who read this are more likely to heal. This book is a must for educators! It is also valuable for many students and parents.

# What I Left Out

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- As with all my book summaries, I have tried to leave out enough so that my readers will want to purchase the book, or at least get their organization to buy it. The cool thing about this book is that it is impossible to summarize all of the great stories that Olson has collected as part of her impressive research. The story about a substitute who was fired because he pointed out that a young black girl was misplaced is just one of dozens of inspiring findings. Another tells of a student who got an F because the teacher thought the poem he handed in was too good to have been his work. The stories of the people who healed are especially important as they display multiple healing paths.

# Founding Syllogism

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- Engagement in learning is central to happy human life. School alienates many individuals from that pleasure and possibility. School practices that wound and make individuals “learning reluctant” have to be examined and named so they can be transformed.
- By understanding the wounds of schooling, why schools wound, and what might be done about it, we need not suffer these hurts forever.

# What are the wounds?

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- The average child, who receives no special instruction or attention in school, is perhaps the most under-identified wounded child in our school system. Many students come away feeling that they are not smart and that their abilities are fixed. Many experience shame that results in painful, burning memories. Anger towards teachers and those in authority often develops. Wanting to be right and just get the assignment done causes a low appetite for risk taking. Unprocessed, powerful feelings about education and learning remain as students enter the adult world. These wounds are largely undiscussed and unnoticed in the discourse of school improvement and educational reform. Students become reluctant to learn and self-conscious. They are easily discouraged and find themselves alienated from the pleasure of learning.

# Taxonomy of the Wounds

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- Olson offers a taxonomy of wound types that serve to take the pleasure out of learning, which is central to human happiness. The first category is *wounds of creativity*. Standardized tests and teacher-centered curriculums inculcate and reward habitual, routine, expected responses, and thereby discourage creativity. This is done in spite of the fact that many think creativity is more and more at the center of workplace skills. These wounds occur when students' novel ideas or capacities are not valued. It also happens when students passions are denied in favor of what is conventionally expected.

# Compliance and Rebellion

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- The next type are *wounds of compliance*. Students are expected to comply with school rules even if they don't make sense. When they complain about other students, they often hear that they shouldn't be a tattletale. If they defend themselves, they may be subject to punishment. These wounds are often rooted in fear. *Wounds of Rebellion* result when students fail to comply and are met with authoritarian discipline structures. Being bad is better for some than being dumb and defiance of authority can earn respect from peers. Teachers need to look for the underlying causes of at-risk behavior. For many, being unfairly blamed leads to defiant behavior, which reduces chances of success. This is a vicious cycle.

# Numbness and Underestimation

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- *Wounds of Numbness* result from years of going through the motions of doing what teachers ask. Students who once had a passion become burnt out with no curiosity, and at worst depressed. This can include students with good grades and rebels alike. *Wounds of Underestimation* occur when students are faced with low expectations based on who they are. Students are classified, tracked, and categorized. They know it and lower expectations become self-perpetuating. Who wants to be with the “dumb kids.” For reasons of class, race, gender, and immigration status, many find school a place that teaches them to value themselves less highly. Such wounds were the most common encountered during Olson’s research.

# Would You Rather be Perfect or Average?

- *Wounds of Perfection* happen to students who constantly chase the highest grades by doing exactly what the teacher wants. They may be unwilling to take risks due to fear of failure. Pressure takes the pleasure out of learning. *Wounds of the Average* happen when students are made to feel stuck in the middle. They are caught between programs for the gifted and handicapped as they qualify for neither. They mark time, do the minimum, and are not challenged. They spend their time unnoticed and don't see themselves as special in any way. They see their abilities as fixed and can't be improved through effort or focus. All of these wounds are produced in school environments that are intolerant of cognitive, emotional, or identity difference. They produce alienation for self as a learner, and reduce pleasure in learning.

# Same Old Situation

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- Olson sees the basic problem as one due to that fact that schools have not changed much since they were invented. Students are sorted and tracked, which results in schools reinforcing the class structure of the surrounding society. While the work place values self-confidence, persistence, creativity, versatility, and flexibility, the school looks for obedience to authority and the ability to tolerate boredom. Even though we are not that good when it comes to diagnostics, teachers use their assessments to group and track students from day one. Olson points to the model used by the Minnesota New Country School as a new way to think about education. (see [newcountryschool.com](http://newcountryschool.com)) The curriculum is based on student projects with teachers acting as advisors for mixed age groups of about 16 students.

# Part II - Healing

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- The biggest barrier to healing is denial of wounds. This causes people to turn inward, to locate blame in themselves, or deny these feelings altogether. Denial is a coping mechanism. This results from the lack of a frame for comprehending what has happened. When Olson looked at the stories of people who healed, she found statements like: good things come from bad things, I have deficits and gifts, I am good at learning from my mistakes, I can do better, mistakes are not the end of the world, I am kind to myself and define myself, and I use my strengths and compensate for my weaknesses. Unexpected success is hard to engineer, but it often starts the healing process. Anger based on proving low expectations to be wrong can help, but you don't want to try to run on anger for long.

# What Fosters Healing.

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- A number of things can be done to foster healing and prevent wounding in schools. We need adult supporters, at least one for every child, who tell the individual that he or she is worthy and has value as they face negative messages. Schools must also make serious efforts not to label students (gifted, average, lazy, crazy, ordinary, etc.) (Dr. Doug: Special education law requires labels. Other than keeping them confidential, I am not sure what we can do about this.) Schools need to provide appropriate challenges for unconventional learners. Experience needs to be framed in the most positive manner.

# Wounded Schools

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- Current school structures just don't create conditions for learning for teachers, and to change these patterns requires intensive effort - energy teachers often feel they don't really have. As our understanding of learning grows more complex and differentiated, it adds to the mismatch between the batch processing model most schools have and how kids learn. For example, about 10% of students do not have brains wired to read at the age at which we expect them to read. Lockstep models based on age are counterproductive. Learning basic facts is not prerequisite for creative thinking and problem solving - it's the other way around. We need schools open year round, kids arriving at different times, kids beginning at different ages, integrated curricula, and more charter schools to allow for greater choice.

# 21st Century Learning

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- This seems to be an important theme. Technology has transformed every other industry sector. It is time to focus on how technology can personalize and transform learning. As it is, when students cross the school threshold, they find that engaging technologies are banned. Included in 21st century literacy skills are the ability to find information, to validate it, to synthesize it, to leverage it and communicate it. The capacity to understand context, to work in teams, and to be multilingual, multicultural, and multidisciplinary are critical competencies for successful new workers. This is a different set of skills than most teachers were raised with.

# Parents Who Heal

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- Olson explains how involved parents can help children withstand insults they might suffer at school. They need to focus on effort rather than fixed ability and offer praise for specific efforts as opposed to general abilities. They need to talk openly about how the school may not support their child's learning. They must reframe mistakes, failures, and disappointments positively as opportunities to learn. They shouldn't be afraid to challenge the school for their child's sake and be willing to seek alternative schools or home teaching if necessary. They should help kids develop a growth mindset. (See Carol Dweck's book on this topic at <http://bit.ly/aJGKWT>.) No one knows your child better than you do. If your child isn't thriving in school, find out why. Also, provide your child with alternative environments in which to learn.

# Teachers Who Heal

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- Olson gives guidelines for teachers so they can better avoid wounding and promote healing. Included are: establish noncompetitive learning environments, emphasize internal motivation, allow students to learn by doing, present content and assess in multiple ways, make the classroom a community of caring, honor the knowledge and feelings students bring, be playful and experimental in instructional design, be student centered, and don't think you know everything. She also suggests that teachers admit to their mistakes and work to learn from them.

# Students Healing One Another

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- In this final chapter Olson gives us a look at examples of students who have become activists in efforts to improve their schools. One theme suggests that students can help their cause by collecting data and presenting it to administration and the board of education in an effort to promote change.

# Cool Quotes

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- “If schools knew how to do it better they’d already be doing it.”  
Author’s husband
- “Most instruction is like learning how to drive a stagecoach, when kids need to operate a Ferrari.” - David Rose
- “If you wanted to create an educational environment that was directly opposed to what the brain was good at doing you probably would design something like a classroom.” - John Medina