
How Does School Wound? Kirsten Olson Has Counted Some Ways

Dr. Kirsten Olson's interviews identified seven kinds of school wounds.

Peter Gray Ph.D. Freedom to Learn

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Let me introduce you to [Dr. Kirsten Olson](#). She is an educational researcher, activist, consultant, and writer deeply concerned about children, learning, and the conditions of our schools. She is, among other things, president of the board of directors of [IDEA](#) (the Institute for Democratic Education in America).

I met her for the first time, for lunch and conversation, a couple of weeks ago, and then I eagerly read her latest book, [Wounded by School: Recapturing the Joy in Learning and Standing Up to Old School Culture](#). If you have ever gone to school, or have a child in school, or might someday have a child in school, or care about children in school, I recommend her book to you.

Wounded by School is the outcome of the research that Olson began when she was an education doctoral candidate at Harvard. As one who loves learning and has always had high esteem for education, Olson intended to conduct research into the delights and enlightenment experienced in the course of schooling. But when she began interviewing people to learn about such positive effects, she found that they talked instead about the *pain* of school. Here is how Olson's doctoral advisor, Sara Laurence-Lightfoot put it in a forward to the book:

"In her first foray into the field — in-depth interviews with an award-winning architect, a distinguished professor, a gifted writer, a marketing executive — Olson certainly expected to hear stories of joyful and productive learning, stories that mixed seriousness, adventure, and pleasure, work and play, desire and commitment. Instead,

she discovered the shadows of pain, disappointment, even cynicism in their vivid recollections of schooling. Instead of the light that she expected, she found darkness. And their stories did not merely refer to old wounds now healed and long forgotten; they recalled deeply embedded wounds that still bruised and ached, wounds that still compromised and distorted their sense of themselves as persons and professionals."

As her project expanded, Olson began interviewing people of all ages, from schoolchildren on up to grandparents, people from a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds, and occupying a wide variety of careers. She was struck by the earnestness and emotion that came forth as people talked about the wounds that they still felt in relation to their schooling. Olson was pioneering a direct way to understand the effects of school on psychological development. She asked people who had been there how school affected them.

In her book, Olson categorizes the wounds into seven groups, and she illustrates each with quotations from interviews. Then, in later chapters, she describes how caring parents, teachers, and students themselves can help prevent and heal the wounds. Here, I'll simply list and describe in my own words Olson's seven categories. (I've added my own twist to the description of each type of wound, so if you find fault in the descriptions, the faults may be mine rather than Olson's.)

The first four categories of wounds all seem to result primarily from the restrictions that are placed on students' behavior and learning in school--the preset curriculum, the narrow set of permissible learning procedures, the tests in which there is one right answer for every question, and the often-arbitrary rules that students have no role in creating. These categories are:

1. Wounds of creativity. School stifles creativity. This is perhaps the most obvious wound of school. Students' own passions and interests are generally ignored. Students' unique, creative ways of solving problems and their outside-the-box answers to questions, which fail to match the teachers' answer sheets, are not understood and are graded as wrong by busy teachers. Rote learning and tests that have one right answer for every question leave no room for creativity. Olson's informants who went on to live creative lives apparently did so *despite*, not because of, schooling. They had to recover or rebuild the creative spirit that had been so

natural to them before starting school. My own guess is that altogether too many others rarely think about creativity once they have lost it in school; they may not even notice this wound. And then there are those who remain creative in those realms that school doesn't touch, but become uncreative in the realms covered by the school curriculum. How many people have totally lost mathematical creativity because of the ways it was taught in school?

2. Wounds of compliance. In school, students must continuously follow rules and procedures that they have no role in creating and must complete assignments that make no sense in terms of their own learning needs. Students generally cannot question these rules and assignments; if they do they are smart-alecks, or worse. To avoid getting into trouble, they learn to obey blindly, and in the process, they learn to be bad citizens in a democracy. Democracy requires citizens who question the rules and insist on changing those that are unfair or don't make sense. They also hurt themselves by going through life following narrower paths than they might if school had not taught them that it is dangerous to explore the edges.

3. Wounds of rebellion. Some students respond to the arbitrary rules and assignments by rebelling rather than complying. They may in some cases feel intense anger toward the system that has taken away their freedom and dignity, toward teachers who seem to be complicit with that system, and toward the goody-goody students who go along. They may manifest their scorn by sitting in the back of the classroom, making snide remarks, blatantly flouting rules, and rarely if ever completing assignments. Rebellion may sometimes be a healthier response than compliance, but if it goes too far it may hurt even more than compliance. Failure in school may cut off valued future paths. Anger toward schooling can lead to a turning away from all forms of learning. And, perhaps most tragically, the rebellion can take forms that physically harm the self and others, especially if the person turns to drugs, promiscuous sex, and crime as forms of self-expression and self-identity.

4. Wounds of numbness. The constant grind of school, doing one tedious assignment after another according to the school's schedule, following the school's procedures, can lead to intellectual numbness. Many of Olson's respondents described themselves as "zoned out" or "intellectually numb" as long as they were in school. Intellectual excitement is rarely rewarded in school, but doggedly grinding it out, doing what you are supposed to do, never missing a

deadline, is rewarded. Brilliant work in one subject at the expense of ignoring another might earn you an A and an F in the two classes; but good-enough, non-inspired work in both subjects might earn you an A in both. This is one of the many ways by which schooling kills intellectual enthusiasm. When students do demonstrate enthusiasm, it is usually about something that has nothing to do with their lessons.

The remaining three categories of wounds identified by Olson all seem to be inflicted by the ways that people are ranked and sorted in school. You can be wounded differently depending on whether you are ranked low, high, or middling.

5. Wounds of underestimation. In her interviews, Olson found that some described ways in which they were wounded by assumptions made about them because of their race, social class, gender, or performance on one or another test that was supposed to measure intelligence or aptitude. In some cases, it seemed easier to go along with the assumption than to fight it, so the assumption became a self-fulfilling prophecy. More generally, a low grade achieved in a course or set of courses can unduly discourage people from following what had been their dream. A would-be biologist chooses a less-desired track because of a D in tenth-grade biology. A would-be author concludes that professional writing is beyond her scope because an English teacher could not see the sparkle of her essays or the brilliance in her non-conventional sentence structure and gave her below-average grades. If only students knew how many great achievers in our society received poor school grades in the realm of their achievement! If only teachers knew.

6. Wounds of perfectionism. High grades and high scores on intelligence tests, too, can wound. Students who develop identities as high achievers may feel extraordinary pressure to continue high achievement, in everything. For them, even an A- in a course, or getting only the second best part in the class play, or rejection by the top Ivy League school, may feel like a terrible failure--failure to live up to the image that others have of them, or the image that they have of themselves. The wound of perfectionism explains why so many "top" students cheat when they feel that they must get the grade that everyone expects them to get (see [School is a Breeding Ground for Cheaters](#)). When grades are the measure of perfection, everything is done for the grade. In school, "perfection" and intellectual numbness are quite compatible. For an

excellent description of how the wound of perfectionism can interfere with real education, I refer you to the courageous [valedictorian speech](#) given a year ago by Erica Goldson.

7. Wounds of the average. The middling student, who is neither sinking nor soaring in the eyes of the school officials, may suffer from invisibility. In Olson's interviews, these people described themselves as feeling insignificant, as people who don't really matter much. In the worst cases, they developed self-identities as people who are unimportant, who do not make waves, who go along but never lead.

How unnecessary all this is! Education, as I have explained before, does not require an imposed curriculum, or forced assignments, or grading and ranking (see, for example, [Lessons from Sudbury Valley](#)). In settings where students direct their own learning, each person has his or her own unique interests and sets of skills and weaknesses. There is no uniform scale on which to rank some as better or worse than others. That kind of school is much more like the real world than is the standard school that we have been talking about here. In the real world we need all kinds of people, all kinds of unique talents and personalities, to make things work and to make life fun.

----- For a somewhat different but compatible view of the wounds of schooling, see my previous essay, [Seven Sins of Our System of Forced Education](#).

About the Author



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