

# The Wounded Student

*Schools sometimes undermine students' confidence in their ability to learn.*

**Kirsten Olson**

**M**arie, an ordinarily outgoing 8th grader, shuts down in math class. She dislikes word problems and avoids games like Tic Tac Toe Squares, which involves finding the square root of numbers less than 1,000.

Once an engaged math student, Marie now sits silently in large-group math instruction, hoping not to be noticed. She is relieved when her teacher does not call on her. She partici-

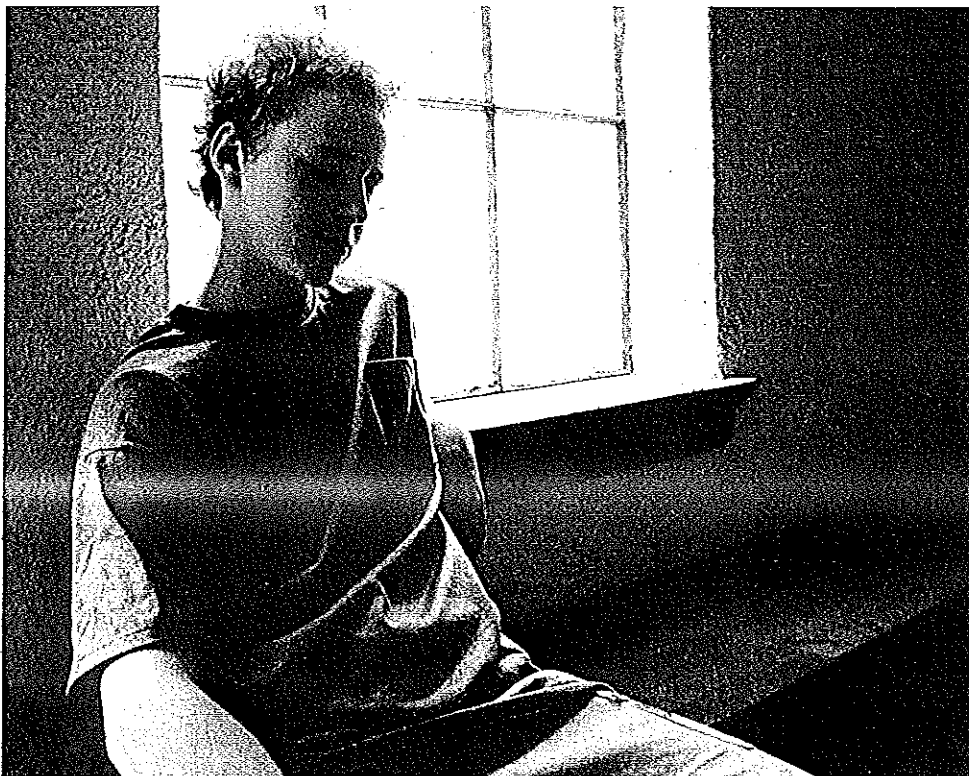
pates tentatively in small-group work and never volunteers to do problems at the board.

After being moved from advanced math to regular math last year, Marie believes she is no longer a competent math student. Her math teacher told her that she "wasn't well equipped" and couldn't keep up with her peers in advanced math. Marie now dreads the many years of math classes ahead of her and rushes through her nightly math homework, which she finds boring and difficult. Once curious about math concepts, she now rarely thinks about the world mathematically because she has come to regard herself as "not good at that kind of stuff."

## **A Vicious Cycle**

Reluctant learners are reluctant for a reason. They often have been wounded by comments from school personnel about their perceived abilities or by specific school practices. Many suffer from lacerations that go unnoticed in school cultures that encourage a stiff upper lip, compliance with group norms, and an uncomplaining acceptance of one's placement in ability groups. Marie has simply assumed that her failures in math are her fault because she didn't "get it fast enough."

I have spent several years interviewing more than 100 individuals about learning reluctance caused by negative school interactions, beginning in graduate



school when I became fascinated by highly accomplished learners who nevertheless failed in school. On the basis of what I learned from these one-on-one interviews, I know that Marie's feelings about being poor in math may never go away unless the school specifically addresses them. Given her hesitancy to engage with math, the school may systematically deny her access to higher-level math content, making her a poorer and less competent math learner than she was before. Schools rarely address this vicious cycle.

Reluctant learning caused by school wounding comes in many forms. For example, schools sometimes discourage learners' divergent thinking because it appears discordant with mainstream class norms. I observed a 9th grade social studies class in which the teacher asked students to interview their parents about their reactions to the events of September 11, 2001. One student said that his parents believed that Americans' reaction to this event was greatly exaggerated and self-



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absorbed. His teacher replied, "Yes, but it was *our* people who died." The student made no reply and did not speak for the rest of the class.

Some learners come to feel that "not learning" (Kohl, 1994) is an expression of positive resistance in a system that does not seem to value them or have high expectations for them. Marques, an academically promising student who attends a school I consult for, is parentless and has been a gang member since he was 13. In 9th grade, his large comprehensive high school suspended him repeatedly for tardiness, poor attendance, and hostile interactions with school personnel, especially men. He eventually dropped out. Two years later, Marques voluntarily enrolled himself in a small, academically

rigorous school designed for students who need specific instruction in "code switching" into appropriate school behaviors as well as intensive personal and academic intervention. The staff's work with Marques also involves exploring, understanding, and acknowledging the ways in which school interactions have wounded him and helping him become responsible for ensuring that harmful interactions don't occur again.

### Self-Image at Stake

My work suggests how deeply personal, internalized, and often hidden school lacerations are and how directly they relate to reluctance in learning. Education environments have the power to shape self-concept and determine what we think of ourselves and our abilities in ways that are unrivaled and often undeserved.

For instance, although IQ scores are unstable until late adolescence and have been largely discredited for determining a single, generalized ability quotient (Murdoch, 2007), many schools still use these tests to sort students as early as 1st grade and determine performance "expectations" from that point forward. I commonly hear stories from students who were told that they had only average or substandard abilities. Many went on to live their lives and make career choices on the basis of the results of a single test, all the while unaware that the results might have been misunderstood or inappropriately applied. This was brought home to me when I interviewed a man in his 80s who could still recall his aptitude scores on tests he took in 4th grade. On the basis of those scores, he decided to become an accountant, a job he disliked, because he was not—and was led to believe he could never become—a good speller.

Although some theorists have suggested that the point of schools is to mold individual self-concept so students will accept a particular place in society (Bowles & Gintis, 1976), most of us who work in schools believe that we are good at seeing talent and potential in students and at using tests judiciously, with only the best interests of our students in mind.

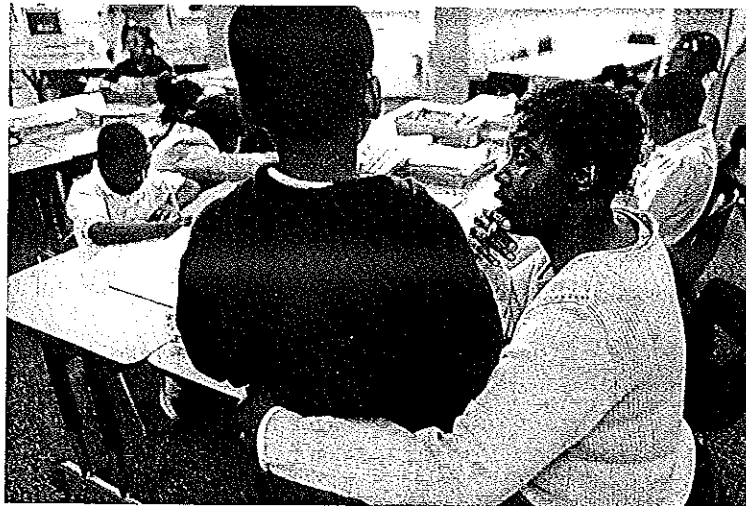
But are we? We often casually and unknowingly wound students when we overfocus on single testing events, track students into fixed ability groups, or decide "what kind of kid" someone is and insist on creating environments that reinforce this concept. Wounding a student's creativity involves not honoring unusual or nonstandard ways of thinking. Wounds of underestimation involve tracking a student into underperformance for an entire school career on the basis of a string of bad test scores, poor grades, a lack of proficiency in academic English, or a lack of understanding of the codes of school behavior. Wounds of perfectionism make students unwilling to take risks in learning because they have cracked the code of school too well and are overly reliant on external approval for motivation and drive.

### Helping Students Heal

How do we work effectively with a reluctant learner like Marie, who is rapidly becoming a poor math student because someone told her she is, or with a student like Marques, who has been labeled a "bad kid" and who must exert great fortitude to return to school? How can we attend to our students' school wounds? How can we avoid wounding students altogether?

■ *Acknowledge school wounds.* We must first acknowledge that reluctance to learn is often based on the student's experiences in school. To get beneath the surface of learning reluctance, teachers may need to gently probe a learner's biography in one-on-one conversations.

The first step in healing is listening to the student, acknowledging that his or her feelings are real, and giving the student space to talk about and reflect on those feelings. For example, noting Marie's declining interest and self-confidence, her current math teacher might ask to have a conversation with



her concerning her feelings about math. She might initiate such a conversation by saying, "From past school reports, it looks like you used to be really enthusiastic about math. What specific incidents happened to make you doubt your abilities in math? How did they make you feel?"

Marques has good reason for being cautious with school personnel. His teacher might broach some of his concerns by saying, "I really admire the way you come to school every day. I know you've gotten a lot of negative feedback from lots of adults in school. What makes you brave enough to come here every day?"

■ *Question labels.* We need to question many of the ways in which schools judge, sort, and classify students and help students understand that these labels need not be with them for life. Whenever a student receives a test score or a class placement, teachers should remind both students and parents of the plasticity of ability and the power of individuals to change their academic paths through effort (Dweck, 2006).

For instance, when handing back a test, the teacher might remind the class, "You may not have done as well as you'd like on this test, and it's important for you to analyze why. Did you study enough? Are there parts of the material you still don't understand and need extra help with?" The teacher might also ask students individually, "Did you understand the directions for this test?" because many reluctant learners have difficulty deciphering the directions on a test or assignment. By coming to understand their own habits as learners, students discover that they can improve their grades on tests and that they are in control of their understanding.

■ *Remind students of their own contributions to school success or failure.* Most researchers find that self-discipline, persistence, and ambition are at least as significant to academic success as innate ability (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). Students need to focus on working hard, establishing good work habits, and setting high goals. If students have received negative evaluations, teachers should both encourage them to question the kinds of judgments school authorities make and support the students in their efforts at self-definition and redefinition.

I sometimes tell struggling elementary and high school students about a memorable college student I taught. Jake, who had serious learning differences, was told point-blank by his 3rd grade teacher that he would be lucky to graduate from high school. Rejecting that teacher's judgment, he developed a healthy skepticism about teachers' evaluations of his abilities and relied on his parents and his athletic abilities for support and self-esteem. He also developed a strong work ethic; in his words, he was "the hardest, most persistent" worker in each of his classes. He graduated from high school and now attends a highly selective liberal arts institution from which he will graduate this spring.

■ *Seek out professional development.* Educators need to become more skilled at identifying the kinds of learning experiences and challenges that students encounter. This knowledge can help prevent teachers from labeling students and tracking them into situations that provoke learning reluctance.

For instance, does a student who seems cautious about writing in class but is an effusive and expressive talker have a graphomotor function issue that needs to be addressed? Might such a student have trouble with "output" and long-term memory of the rules of written expression? Does another student have difficulty following directions step by step? The teacher could strengthen weak sequential awareness and sequential memory functions using specific interventions. A student may have trouble remaining mentally present in the classroom or be inconsistent in the ways in which she pays attention and exerts mental effort. Rather than regarding these students as sloppy, disorganized, or lazy, teachers need to dig deeper and increase their own professional knowledge of common neurodevelopmental difficulties.

The Schools Attuned Program, designed by Mel Levine and his associ-

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ates (2002), offers professional development programs that help education practitioners understand and effectively work with students who encounter learning difficulties.

■ *Reflect on how you speak with students.* In the crush of the school day and the pressures of accountability, school personnel often cease to hear how they sound to students. In some cases, video analysis of teacher-student or administrator-student interactions can uncover wounding talk about student ability, such as, "you are this type of kid," or unconscious attitudes that slip into conversations with students or conversations among teachers about students.

In *Talk Matters*, Beatrice Fennimore (2000) described schools as linguistic communities that embody powerful moral and democratic (or anti-democratic) assumptions. However, the assumptions and value judgments embedded in common school talk may be invisible to many teachers. For some educators, simply becoming aware of how they classify and label students in casual language is a first step in ending a cycle of wounding. A teacher might keep a journal of school talk, noting the ways in which students are described in school meetings or among administrators and whether these descriptions allow for the possibility of growth, transformation, and surprise. Beware of characterizations such as "those kinds of kids" or "children from poor backgrounds." Attitudes like these end up eroding the potential for growth—not just in students, but in adults in school as well.

### Don't Label—Listen

As schools move away from 19th-century models of schooling, with their rigid classifications of students by ability and their passive, adult-centered teaching and learning patterns, we must acknowledge that some students have been wounded along the way. Nevertheless, all students have the capacity to heal from these wounds. By listening to our students attentively and without judgment, we can help them heal. ■

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**Kirsten Olson** is Visiting Assistant Professor at Wheaton College in Norton, Massachusetts, as well as a school consultant; [kirsten@oldsow.net](mailto:kirsten@oldsow.net). She is the author of the forthcoming book, *Healing from the Wounds of Schooling* (Teachers College Press, 2008).