

THE SALT OF IGNORANCE: EDUCATION AND THE WOUNDED CHILD

“Relationships are the agents of change and the most powerful therapy is human love.”
—Dr. Bruce Perry

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Abstract

Childhood trauma has widespread implications on individuals across the length of a lifetime, impacting physical, mental, and emotional health. The author uses narrative to explore the past schooling experiences of an educator in public education, who was being abused at home throughout childhood. Through past-to-present storytelling, the author examines the ways in which practices and policies within public education systems have had, and may continue to have negative impacts on students living with complex (childhood) trauma. The author draws upon the work of Dr. Bruce Perry and Maia Szalavitz and their *The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook*, emphasizing their research in relational health and connectedness to support the healing of children with complex trauma. She considers the challenges in creating authentic, healing spaces in mainstream schools for traumatized students, and how the embodiment of holistic education values, beliefs, and practices can offer the love and nurturance needed to support the healing of children living with trauma.

Keywords: childhood trauma, public education, relationships, love, holistic education

The bell is about to ring. It's Friday afternoon, and there's a buzz of excitement in the Grade 1 class as children prepare to go home for the weekend. Papers are being tossed in the recycling, art supplies cleaned up, and workbooks are being placed in tiny desks. Indoor shoes are removed and perfectly lined up against the wall until Monday morning. Backpacks packed up and thrown over little shoulders, as conversations of weekend plans fill the room. The students line up at the door in girl, boy, girl, boy pattern as they have diligently practiced throughout the school year. Teachers are wishing their students a great weekend as they tuck in chairs that have been missed, and pick up scraps of forgotten paper on the dusty floor. The sound of the bell summons a rowdy but organized stampede, as children from all classrooms run to catch their buses home for two days of play and rest. *Thank God it's Friday!*

Amidst the hustle and bustle of home-time, the Grade 1 teacher doesn't see that one of her students, a little girl, has hidden in the cloakroom. Her name is Josie (the name has been changed for confidentiality). She has closed the sliding doors, and is crouched down on the floor in darkness, clutching her backpack and burying her face behind her coat that is still hanging on her hook. Josie is crying. It's her mother's turn to have her this weekend. All visits have been strictly scheduled in advance in family court. But Josie doesn't know, or understand this. She's scared. And she doesn't want to go home.

When Josie's teacher notices her, she uses a kind voice in an attempt to soothe the distraught child and coax her out of the cloakroom. It's well past the bell now, and Josie's mother has come to the school to get her. Still hiding, the teacher informs the office of the situation. Josie can hear the heavy footsteps of the principal, as he walks down the hall and into the classroom. He smiles down at her, reaches out and grabs her arms firmly, and begins to lift her little body off of the floor. Cries turn to screams—Josie kicks and punches, and tries to bite

any exposed piece of the principal's flesh she can see within the chaos. Backpack in one hand, student in the other, the principal hauls both down the hall to the main office. He ensures that, Josie, and her belongings, are safely in the parent's care. Safety is his main responsibility, after all. Josie's mother grabs her by the wrists, drags her out of the school, shoves her into the car and drives away for the weekend—two days of emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. *Thank God It's Friday?*

How many students do we know, like Josie, who are hiding in cloakrooms? How many are hiding in closets, corners of the schoolyard, and under desks? How many are hiding behind defiance, lashing out, disruptive behaviours, perfectionism, or academic achievement? The truth is, many, but the number should be irrelevant. If there is just one student in hiding, then that one, is one too many.

Josie is now an educator. Today, she struggles in her belief in, and support of mainstream education, and questions its impacts on student well-being—more specifically, students living with complex trauma. She struggles in knowing whether or not school, that appeared to be safer than home at the time, helped her, or contributed to her trauma. In being considered physically safe at school, are students emotionally safe? Are children's souls, their precious inner lives through which they derive human purpose and meaning, being loved and nurtured? In its efforts to increase achievement and produce high standardized test scores, perhaps public education systems are really just the “lesser of two evils” when it comes to supporting students with childhood trauma—students like Josie.

Throughout an exploration of Josie's experiences with schooling as a student and educator, I seek to gain more understanding of the impact education should have on the body, mind, emotions, and soul of the individual. I will examine how mainstream education, as a

system, has, and continues to throw salt on the wounded souls of abused children through policy, practice (or lack of practice), and neglects to address the social injustices within these systems that are often leading to trauma in the first place—and how the embodiment of holistic education values and authentic connectedness can shed some light on the darkness in the cloakroom.

My research and arguments will be discussed through the lens of childhood trauma, of Josie's lived experience, and what I believe to be a neglected public health epidemic. The National Institute of Mental Health in the United States provides a clear definition of childhood trauma. Childhood trauma is “the experience of an event by a child that is emotionally painful or distressful, which often results in lasting mental and physical effects” (What is Childhood Trauma, n.d.). This definition draws from the emotional experience, which is important to keep in mind when considering Josie's story, and the role of education systems to support emotional and relational health.

Childhood trauma has, and continues to be prevalent among societies today, although any data collected and represented on child abuse are only of those incidents that are actually reported. How many incidents are left unreported? Research and conversations on the connections between childhood trauma and mental health outcomes later in life, have recently become more of a focus within healthcare and mental health communities. The article, “Child Abuse and Mental Disorders in Canada,” published recently in 2014, in the Canadian Medical Association Journal states (Afifi et al., 2014):

We found strong associations between child abuse and mental conditions. In Canada, 32% of the adult population has experienced physical abuse, sexual abuse and/or exposure to intimate partner violence in childhood. All 3 types of child abuse were associated with all types of interview-diagnosed mental

disorders, self-reported mental conditions, suicidal ideation and suicide attempts in models adjusting for sociodemographic variables. These models indicate that the relation between all 3 types of child abuse and mental conditions are robust. (p. E331)

What may be a shocking reality to some, is how common child abuse (physical abuse, sexual abuse, neglect) actually is in our communities and in our country. What is even more shocking, is that the research on childhood trauma and its impacts on personal well-being and mental health is far from new territory explored. The Adverse Childhood Experience (ACE) Study began breaking new ground on this topic in the late 1990s. Adverse Childhood Experiences are defined as:

Negative, stressful, traumatizing events that occur before age 18 are referred to as adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). ACEs are divided into 10 categories that fall under the umbrellas of abuse, neglect, and household dysfunction. These experiences create toxic stress. Children with ongoing, unmitigated toxic stress develop patterns of adaptive and physiological disruptions that compromise health over the lifespan. (What are ACEs, n.d.)

Dr. Bruce Perry, child psychiatrist and senior fellow at the Child Trauma Academy in Texas, with reporter and author, Maia Szalavitz, wrote the first edition of *The Boy Who was Raised as a Dog And Other Stories from a Child Psychiatrist's Notebook* in 2006. In their 2017 edition, they comment on the increased awareness of ACES over the last decade, and specify the risk factors for children as they grow and develop throughout their lives (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017):

As we mention throughout the book, developmental adversity affects the entire body—not just the brain. The first ACE study which looked at the current health of 17,000 adults, was led by Robert Anda of the Center for Disease Control and Vince Felitti of Kaiser Permanente in California. They began publishing results in 1998. The basic findings were stunning: as the number of ACEs increased, so did the risk for everything from heart disease, stroke, and obesity to addictions and depression in adult life. (We discuss this work throughout the book; for more on the specifics on this research, see Chapter 7 in *Born for Love*). Despite the importance and power of these findings, a twenty-year ‘innovation gap’ followed. Only within the last five years have these important studies begun to have widespread impact on practice and policy. (p. 316)

While the ACE study is epidemiological, and does not encompass the complexity of the human experience on an individual level, it does provide critical insight into the increased risk factors of child maltreatment, and widespread impacts on mental and physical health within a societal context. An understanding of these scientific truths are important and beneficial to systems of education, those who work within them, and the children they should be serving. However, I would question the impact Perry and Szalavitz refer to, in relation to an understanding of childhood trauma and its impacts, and the practices and policies education systems implement in response to these realities. As an educator in her thirties, Josie only became aware of the research on childhood adversity and health risks less than two years ago, when she experienced a rapid decline in her own mental health, and an increase in the already-existing symptoms of toxic stress in her body. Intrusive thoughts, flashbacks of abuse, insomnia,

depression, debilitating anxiety, suicidal ideation, and difficulty soothing overwhelming emotions, quickly became confusing, exhausting, everyday experiences for her. What's more, is that Josie exhibited very clear symptoms and behaviours of toxic stress patterns throughout her schooling as a child—chronic suicidal thoughts, disordered eating, and self-harming, to name a few. While it cannot be assumed that Josie's childhood abuse by caregivers is solely responsible for her mental health struggles in adulthood (there are many forms of genetic and environmental factors that contribute to health and well-being), they are undoubtedly connected.

Josie's new-found understanding of the impact of early adversity, and how her thoughts, behaviours, and emotions, were likely in response to toxic stress held in her body, only became clear to her through the recent work she has been doing with a caring, holistic therapist with an understanding of developmental trauma; slowly and gently addressing and processing the physical, psychological, and emotional imprints left on her from many years of abuse and emotional neglect.

Josie continues to struggle today with the difficult question of “why?” Why wasn't she seen and heard? How was it, that the appropriate response to her distress as a child, was to pull her off of the floor, drag her down the hall and thrust her into the arms of one of her abusers? Why was Josie's desperate attachments to her teachers throughout her schooling not a clear indicator of concern, that there were deeper problems existing—all having a profound impact on her physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being? Josie may never fully reach the understanding she has been seeking in her healing from childhood trauma. I believe that some of the answer lies in the dangerous ways in which systems of education are structured, organized and operate.

I agree with Perry and Szalavitz's statement (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017, p.314), which I interpret as a call to action for those who work in education, to recognize the importance of creating the spaces that help children heal. It is worth sharing the full statement here:

We cannot emphasize enough how important it is for traumatized children to be given the most possible control, predictability, and ability to moderate the timing, duration, and intensity of their experiences. They need these elements to be maximised, not just in therapy—but in the rest of their lives, particularly places where they spend a lot of time, like school. To become resilient, children need environments where they feel safe and comfortable, and know what to expect so that their sensitized, overactive stress systems can gradually become calmer and more 'smoothly' regulated. (p. 314)

Although Josie had teachers that she believes gave her care while at school, she was certainly not given “the most possible, control, predictability to moderate the timing, duration and intensity” of her own school experiences (p. 314). Like Josie, students with histories of trauma today continue to be deprived of the flexibility and self-autonomy that contributes to their healing. The teacher remains the ultimate authority in the classroom. The principal is the ultimate authority of the school. Superintendents are authorities of the district, and they develop strategies to increase academic achievement. All the while there are still children living in fear, hiding in cloakrooms, and hugging lunchless backpacks. There are still enforced lines, controlled bathroom passes, and overpopulated classrooms. There are loud bells, and factory-like buildings, with fluorescent lights and windows that do not open. To the traumatized student, and arguably to any student, these spaces are not comfortable nor safe. Our societal ignorance of the impacts of childhood trauma, and our acceptance of education founded upon obedience and

control, allows us to create cost-effective, and arguably unhealthy physical, and emotional spaces, at the risk of a public health crisis.

In her essay, “Listening to Ancient Voices,” Leslie Owen Wilson speaks to the paradox that exists between the disjuncture of the family and education (Owen Wilson, 2005). As a society, we look to systems such as education, to fill the void left from the brokenness of the family unit. If students come from broken homes, abuse, and neglect, then school, and “getting a good education,” will help them rise above their adversity, right? This is a dangerous misunderstanding. Public education systems, as they are, may consequently contribute to the shattering: “Here lies the heart of the paradox, because through the common practices of schooling we promote methods and principles that support conformity, blind obedience, and the importance of sameness and compliance” (Owen Wilson, 2005. P. 170). How can students with trauma thrive in environments with policies and practices that are embedded in control and obedience? How can students heal in environments that mirror the damaging power dynamics of an abusive family home?

It is both a cause of great anger and frustration, that mainstream schooling has been ignoring decades of scientific research related to childhood trauma; its physical, psychological, and emotional impacts and risk factors for children as they grow and develop. Josie has been working in public education for more than ten years. Throughout her career (including teacher education and professional development), she has not had a professional conversation with a colleague, or worked in a school where an understanding of childhood trauma was considered a priority to help children learn. It is important to question if Josie’s experiences are similar to that of other educators within mainstream schooling provincially, nationally, and internationally. If education systems continue to reflect the restrictive models of generations past, without an

understanding of trauma and the developing brain, then to be truly *trauma-informed* requires pedagogical and relational transformation. I will discuss this further when exploring holistic approaches and practices in educational settings.

For schools that have claimed to integrate an understanding and response to trauma in practice, it is important to recognize that they may be doing so for the wrong reasons, investing only in academic achievement. It is critical to be cautious of the ways in which education systems seemingly integrate practices of “trauma-informed” schools for the purpose of addressing equity to increase test scores. Paul C. Gorski, activist and educator reveals the way in which implementing “trauma-informed practices” loses its true meaning and purpose when it becomes the next popular equity strategy. He explains more eloquently than I:

At some point, trauma-informed practices really ought to at least partially focus on eliminating the sources of trauma -- at the very least, the ways those sources operate in classrooms, schools, and school systems -- and not about helping students experiencing trauma survive the institutions that often are contributing to their trauma.

To be clear, as I’ve posted before, I attended school as a student who had experienced forms of trauma. I wish my teachers could have understood those traumas and not punished me for their impacts. I was often punished for them in ways that caused more trauma: being excluded from field trips, other micro humiliations. I know the school-to-prison pipeline is populated by students of color who were punished even more harshly than I was for similar, reasonable reactions to trauma -- sometimes reasonable reactions to the racism they were experiencing in school. So I believe that, when implemented in informed, justice-oriented ways,

trauma-informed practices have a role. However, that role cannot be to replace institutional equity and justice efforts the way grit, growth mindset, and the ‘culture of poverty’ have replaced them -- and this, unfortunately, appears to be what is happening in a lot of schools and districts. (Gorski, 2018)

I share Gorski’s insights into the detours he claims education systems are taking to avoid addressing the underlying social injustices such as racism, poverty, domestic violence, and discrimination of any kind, that lead to the root of trauma.

Another such equity detour risk for children living with complex trauma, in all its tragic irony, is the commercialized notion of wellness. Education systems today script well-being strategies, using “evidence-based” practices, to demonstrate their efficiency in addressing student mental health and well-being. Practices such as meditation and mindfulness have been embraced as productive and positive methods to reduce stress in educational settings. However, generalizations of practices (for example, sitting with eyes closed, or lying down during meditation), and inadequate training of these practices, might deeply trigger students who have experienced abuse. This is damaging and irresponsible. First, if the sole purpose or goal of a well-being strategy is to increase academic achievement across a district, rather than simply advocate for, and promote well-being, this does not reflect an environment of care and compassion for students, let alone vulnerable students with trauma histories. Second, mindfulness practices, if not implemented holistically, authentically, and with an understanding of trauma, can have negative impacts on survivors of childhood abuse—especially when educators are being asked to implement healing practices that they do not truly value, understand, or practice themselves.

Mindfulness in public education. This on-trend practice of growing popularity has been adopted in classrooms to bring calm and relaxation to the body and mind. Bandwagon mindfulness practices encourage us to sit with our thoughts and feelings in the present moment, often being still in a seated position with eyes closed. How might this impact the hypervigilant child, who is afraid of the dark and has difficulty with emotional regulation? A practice with the intention to calm and soothe, may consequently become an act of retraumatization. As an adult who was abused as a child, Josie still experiences difficulty in closing her eyes during mindfulness meditation without her body becoming physically and emotionally overwhelmed. She participates in mindfulness practices with her eyes open, and in a position that is comfortable for her, while reminding herself that she can disengage from the practice at any time. Are all students offered these same choices in schools? Gorski reminds us that we cannot afford to take detours to avoid addressing social injustice by becoming “trauma-informed.” We also cannot afford to implement subsequent wellness practices without an understanding of their impacts, particularly within wider contexts of power dynamics, body autonomy, and consent.

In his recent book, *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and Transformative Healing*, David A. Treleaven explains how being authentically trauma-sensitive is a critical choice (Treleaven, 2018):

When we commit to working with trauma, we come to bear witness to suffering. Whether it’s a one-time conversation with a student or a longer-term relationship with a client, we enter into a relationship with other people’s traumatic pain. When the trauma we witness is the result of an accident or a natural disaster, it’s generally easy to empathize. The tragedy could happen to anyone. But when the events we encounter are interpersonal and rooted in social and economic oppression, the

dynamic becomes more complicated. We become caught in a conflict between perpetrator and victim. In these moments, we become forced to choose a side. There is no room for neutrality. Why? Because any attempt at impartiality simply reinforces the status quo. To not choose means we've already chosen (p. 58-59).

Education systems must commit to working with trauma simply for the fact that trauma exists within the bodies, minds, and hearts of children who are entrusted to their care. As Treleaven explains, we must not become a bystander to traumatic suffering in implementing only bandage-type, one size fits all mindfulness that “is sometimes cast as neutral, in that it involves observing things as they are” (p. 59-60), and undermines the complex needs and experiences of each student in the classroom. He cautions us that we cannot “brush off responsibility to choose a side just because we're practicing mindfulness,” and that trauma-sensitive mindfulness is “not simply a box we can check, but an orientation to working with systemic harm” (p. 59-60). Mindfulness practice without the consideration and understanding of trauma is ultimately a detour around addressing trauma in systems. And any system that does not address trauma in its policies and practices, particularly practices such as mindfulness that should be intended to calm and heal body, mind, soul, and emotions, ultimately disregards the suffering of child abuse survivors.

Perry and Szalavitz also caution us to be aware that becoming trauma-informed is not through a one-time training. They explain, “Self-declared experts arise with packages of programs allowing systems to ‘check the box’ about being ‘trauma-informed.’ Over time, this will settle out, and we remain hopeful that the result will be positive” (Perry & Szalavitz, 2017. p. 317). These insights demonstrate the need to embrace a holistic shift in education paradigms, leading us toward the ultimate agent of real change for children with adversity—love.

Where do we see love at the system level of public education? More often than not, we don't. Education systems claim to provide students with the best care, tools, and resources they require to become successful adults and citizens of this world. But what does that have to do with love? And what do we really mean by success? High grades on a report card? First place in a sporting event? A scholarship to an esteemed university? A high-paying career? Certainly, these "successes" are high achievements. However, success does not equate love, empathy, and care for the self, those around us, or the world. Can all of these achievements really amount to a fulfilling life, if we do not place love at the center of learning? Mainstream schooling, with one sole focus on achievement, further damages already wounded children subjected to complex trauma and abuse.

If it is the hope of educators today that all students, including those with trauma, not only survive, but thrive as human-beings, then it is imperative that they fight to reframe what it means to thrive in a current schooling culture of competition and academic achievement. Josie's schooling experience matters—not just as one story of many survivors of childhood abuse, but as a narrative that addresses the greater, societal roles education systems play in addressing (rather, not addressing) childhood trauma as a social injustice. First and foremost, it is a disgraceful disservice to children to ignore long-standing research on trauma, the brain, and the impacts of adverse childhood experiences. Second, current system structures, practices, and approaches do not embody an education of the whole child—founded in nurturing relationships, compassion, understanding, and love.

What is becoming profoundly more clear through Josie's experiences of childhood abuse, is how mainstream education is sending children down a river that eventually dries out, leaving them with a desperate thirst for the soul.

A synonym for education is enlightenment—to bring light into darkness (English Oxford Living Dictionaries, 2018). In his Ted Talk entitled “Changing Education Paradigms,” Sir Ken Robinson explains that “the current system was designed and conceived for a different age. It was conceived in the intellectual culture of The Enlightenment” (Robinson 2010). The development of this system that we continue to operate within today, as Robinson asserts, has stemmed from the pursuit of only economic development and academic ability (Robinson, 2010). The result? A violent separation of the soul from the individual. *In Whole Child Education*, John P. Miller further explains the current disconnect that results from the model Robinson identifies (Miller, 2010):

Education systems have reinforced fragmentation rather than connectedness. They have become part of a world corporate corruption, deep distrust of politicians and the political process, environmental destruction, and an empty lifestyle based on materialism and consumption. The obsession with test results rather than a sensible approach to accountability has only led to deeper and more pervasive forms of fragmentation and alienation (Miller p. 4).

What does this mean for the abused child? Children exposed to regular, complex trauma in interpersonal relationships are living each day in environments that are emotionally and spiritually disconnected. They attend school, a space divided into a list of expectations where academic performance supersedes well-being. They try to cope as best they can while body, mind, and spirit are torn apart by unhealthy levels of stress. And when they do not meet the expectations? They are punished. In contrast to the restrictive and oppressive system of which Robinson alludes, we undoubtedly require a true enlightenment in education today. We require an enlightenment of the heart.

If the foundation of our policies and principles is based on the basic, primal need to give and receive love, then there is hope for public education. There is hope for healing the wounded child. Miller explains that by “being more attentive to our inner life, or soul life, we can perhaps help in the process of healing ourselves and the planet (Miller, 2000, p. 6). There are already schools both nationally, and internationally, that have embraced love at the center of learning. We can learn from them. The Albany Free School roots learning in an environment where “there’s space for time and emotions,” and where “love, empathy and a passion for life are encouraged” (The Albany Free School is a Place Where, n.d.). The voice of the child speaks volumes to this culture of education. Harmony Bickerton, a previous student of The Albany Free School, shares her experience in a blog post:

The Free School teaches so many things but one of the most important things I’ve learned here is self-confidence and to trust in myself. For so many years I was never really sure of myself or if I was doing things ‘right’ or as well as the other kids in public school were doing it. But teachers at The Free School always pointed me in the right direction, but never pushed or forced. They were there for me but encouraged me to figure things out on my own. (Bickerson, 2015).

Schools such as The Albany Free School nurture the whole child, and base their practices in holistic teaching and learning. In envisioning loving school spaces, purposeful practices could include meditation and mindfulness, yoga and other kinds of movement and play, expressive arts and music, and dedicated, yet unstructured, time exploring the natural world. Miller brings these practices to light in his chapter entitled “The Soulful Teacher” (Miller, 2000). When implemented in ways that are sensitive to trauma, by inviting choice and freedom of participation, movement, design and pacing of these practices, the internal and external

experience of the child trauma survivor can be validated and honoured. These practices can be healing for children with trauma, when they are embraced authentically and passionately, placing the well-being of children paramount to academic achievement.

However, the practices of holistic education are only as healing as the human beings who stand behind them. Mindfulness meditation, yoga, or creative arts and movement, I believe, can support children with trauma in healing and learning, only within the environment of safe (safety of body, mind, soul, and emotions) connections to others, and kind, loving relationships.

I will conclude with a quotation from Dr. Perry that speaks to the reality of Josie's experiences. He says, "Fire can warm or consume, water can quench or drown, wind can caress or cut. And so it is with human relationships: we can both create and destroy, nurture and terrorize, traumatize and heal each other" (Perry and Szalavitz, 2017, p. xxviii). No human connection or loving relationship is possible without embracing the beauty, the tragedy, and the dynamic intensity that exists within the whole person.

The abused and neglected children of this world are calling on us, they are counting on us, to nurture their bodies, minds, souls, and emotions. They deserve the comfort, safety, and care that will cleanse their wounds. Schools will continue to fail them without a fundamental shift toward education systems that prioritize loving relationships above test scores.

That little girl hiding in the cloakroom needed and deserved love, far more than a grade on her report card. We can do better.

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