

Of Broken Hearts and Tangled Fury: Institutionalized Shame and Humiliation in the Education Sector

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A variety of social, economic and political actors and processes can become “tangled up in school” (Nespor, 1997). Rather than drawing members of the school community together, these tangled webs very often drive them apart. In this paper, I explore some of the ways solidarity and the global quest to assert the equal dignity of all human beings (Lindner 2006) is threatened when the context of schooling becomes a place where teachers, students, staff, administrators, parents and policymakers experience shame and/or seek to impose on others feelings of humiliation. As an important context of socialization and the learning of “socialization templates” (Ross 2000), the education sector could potentially play an important role in developing the consciousness of equal dignity; in shaping children and youth perceptions of injustice and humiliation; and in helping them acquire socialization templates to address acts of humiliation and injustice in ways that affirm equal dignity rather than create further humiliation. That requires NOT the suppression of the “humiliated fury” (Scheff 1999) that tend to escalate violence, but to develop authentic changes in perception regarding the deployment and reception of humiliation. This is a tall order, one that is challenging all socialization contexts, especially in this time of transition when we as individuals and societies have intellectualized but not fully internalized our own equal dignity or metabolized what equal dignity means in terms of our connections and interactions with our neighbor. The result is that in the tangled web of social, economic and political processes that make up the education sector, shame, shaming and unacknowledged shame is tangled up with our consciousness of humiliation and humiliated fury in ways that tends to escalate conflicts and injustices rather than transform them. In others words, we have yet to offer ourselves or future generations a useful “toolkit” for responding to injustice and humiliation in ways that affirm equal dignity. What this ultimately entails is an ontological shift away from the idea of “special” or “exceptional”– special people, special relationships, “exceptional” nations and so forth. It should come as no surprise that schools have their work cut out for them!

After a brief analysis of how shame and humiliation have become tangled in the education sector at this historical moment, I will explore three dynamics that challenge schools’ becoming contexts of equal dignity: (1) **humiliation-based accountability**, especially in historical contexts where race, class, gender and ability inequalities served to naturalize “personal responsibility” and institutionalize the denial of shame (Scheff 1999); (2) the role of **shame-avoidant identity politics in educational policy formation**; and (3) **societal tolerance for blame-speak and hyper-dignity in our political discourse** generally and within the education sector in particular. The paper is based upon several studies I have conducted in the United States and southern Africa on

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the ways in which the education sector can influence (for better or worse) conflict transformation.