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Abstract

Resisting Humiliation in Schooling:
Narratives and Counter-narratives

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Humiliation is so deeply engrained in the structure of mainstream American culture, including in public education, that it is insidious and often considered “normal.” Indeed, many people tell stories of humiliation that they remember as excruciatingly painful (their own or others’ that they witnessed), and say they would do nearly anything to avoid being humiliated. Yet there is a notable lack of attention to humiliation as a problem in schools (both within the schools themselves as well as in the media).

It is first argued that on a personal level, most people seem very aware of the presence of humiliation in schools, whereas on the public level, humiliation in schools is seldom recognized or directly discussed except in the most extreme cases. This disjunction is accounted for by considering the structure of humiliation and how it functions in society and in the individual psyche. More specifically, pertinent literatures are drawn on to account for both the intersubjective and the intrasubjective aspects of humiliation. It is argued that a major overlooked and perhaps unrecognized reason that humiliation persists is because it is embedded in narratives we live by – both shared meta-narratives and individuals’ stories. Next considered is the question of what is humanly at stake if humiliation persists, especially in schooling. Finally, it is argued that because narratives contribute significantly to the persistence of humiliation in schooling and because the stakes are high, consciously constructed counter-narratives are crucial to interrupting cultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal circuits of humiliation. Two types of counter-narratives are considered: the stories we tell in schooling and the pedagogies that are used in classrooms.