

Too Scared to Learn – Brief Notes

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Introduction to thinking about violence

- **What counts as violence?** – During my research I was often asked what I was including as “violence.” Often people assumed I was only referring to one type of violence, often “domestic violence.” I think it is important to include a range of degrees of violence and all types of violence in order not to lose sight of the magnitude of the problem. Fragmenting different types and degrees stops us seeing that the problem is enormous.
- **“Trauma”** – is a helpful term because of the focus on the impact on the person, not the degree of violence, but it is part of a medical frame of understanding violence as “outside normal human experience.” We have to ask whose experience is being considered when so many women as well as racialized men and gay men are subject to violence?
- There is a problem with using a **medical** frame to understand violence – it leads to thinking of results of violence as a sickness or disorder – to be addressed in private with a doctor – not present in all educational settings.
- The medical frame contributes to a sense that there are those who are **“normal”** who haven’t experienced violence and then there are the others who must “heal” to return to normal. There is a problem with the concept of “healing” – meaning being able to cope with “normal” life, which includes the possibility of further violence.
- Shift of those who have experienced violence as “other” is part of how “we” protect ourselves stressing that violence happens to **“them” not “us.”** It is important to recognize violence is “our” issue as workers too – affecting our teaching, our work in a myriad of ways.
- We need to be careful not to think of someone who as experienced violence as a **“poor soul”** – important to see strength of survivor and the “learning” from violence – greater sensitivity learned from violence may be awkward, but can also be valuable.
- We need to **question** whether/how violence serves society – value of numbness? Value of sensitivity? We must question who needs to heal in a sick, off-balance world?
- People who have experienced violence are **canaries in the mine** – who tell us that the world as it is, is not good enough.

Hidden Impacts of Trauma

Looking at a variety of ways that the experience of violence may mean that literacy learners are struggling in silence with impacts they need to learn about, eg. how to stay present enough to learn, and are having trouble paying attention to what they are actually trying to learn in the classroom:

All or nothing – for example someone is either trustworthy, or they make one mistake, then I give up on them forever. There is no middle-ground – either I am doing brilliantly or I am failing. Students start with huge enthusiasm, then quit when they are faced with the day-to-day slog.

Presence – may be challenging to be present enough to learn. What distracts, what helps a student to be present to learn?. How can we help learners explore presence and also honour their skills to leave when they need to?

All or nothing and presence both underlie other issues raised here.

Living with crises – if crises are what is familiar, then calm may be hard to cope with. Continual crises may distract from learning, make it hard to be present. How can we help students focus?

Trust and boundaries – if people who should have been trustworthy weren't, then a lot of energy may go to figuring out who to trust. How can teachers be sure to be trustworthy and build trust in the classroom?

Telling – if during every task where students are asked to write or talk about their life they are deciding how much to tell – whether they will be shamed or have to look after the listener – this takes energy. Need space for joy as well as telling. Challenge to create safety in the classroom and to make it safe for those want to tell and those want safety from hearing about violence.

Setting Goals

Judith Herman describes trauma as caused by events which “overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection and meaning” (Herman, 1992:33). This leads to complicated problems with control, connection and meaning in the classroom.....

Control – complicated terrain – don't like being controlled, but also uncomfortable and mistrustful of being in control – all or nothing - total control or hand over control. If students start and stop attending classes often seen as not serious, but may be exploring taking control.

Connection – connection is necessary for communication. Can't assume learners can connect – building connections may take a lot of work and takes time.

Meaning – if learners lose “meaning” does this contribute not only to trouble believing in the possibility of goals and finding meaning in life, but also in finding meaning in words, or print in general?

Journal writing can be a place where learners can control their words and gradually connect with others and place new meaning on their experiences. Exploring control, connection and meaning can lead to possibilities of imagining a future and so move towards goal setting.

The Whole Person

The whole person is affected by violence. A person can often feel fragmented and disconnected from the self. In education we need to pay attention to each aspect so that it doesn't block learning. Each aspect may also be drawn in and enhance learning.

Spirit – recognize the power of the feeling of worthlessness to block learning. How can we build the belief in the value of the self as a “spirit”- a precious creation - who should be treated well by all and learns all the time?

Emotions – explore emotions, especially panic – does the learner close down when they are afraid? What can help them deal with panic and continue to learn? What role do joy and hope play in helping learning? How can we foster these?

Body – has the body been damaged by violence? Are there illnesses from somatizing (absorbing violence in the body)? Can we recognize the need to move and be physically comfortable? Can we use movement to help learning?

Mind – if learners are feeling stupid this can block learning. How can we help students believe they have a mind that works? Exploring memory, playing mind games, using the imagination, can all stir the mind into creative action.

Bearing Witness

Bearing witness is a central part of many educators' work, but is often spoken about as not legitimate, not the “real” work. This contradiction compounds workers' exhaustion as they often feel they must always be able to support students AND that it is not their work. Consequently they often have no support themselves to help them to support others, or to help them deal with the impact on themselves of what they have witnessed.

Connections and divides between education and therapy/healing

What divide? – there are cultural questions about what therapy or healing will be seen as appropriate and about where the divide between education and healing should fall (or if there is any divide) which need to be explored and discussed so that program workers and students are not isolated.

Connections to other resources – what resources can be found in the community for the teacher and for the student?

Models which include healing? – what new models can we explore which bridge the gaps between healing and education in creative ways with adequate resources?

Training? – are there other organizations that can help educators learn about working with these issues?

What is the Cost?

Have you got a minute? – asked to “hear”, but also not framed as included in the work in most settings, especially institutions. So the requests comes before and after teaching, in odd moments, which adds to the intensity.

Doing it wrong – fear of saying the wrong thing, feeling helpless which leads to the temptation to “rescue”, to take over and try to make it better. Makes it particularly important not to be coping alone, but to have a range of supports.

Dealing with anger – hard to deal with anger and not being trusted, easy to take it personally, which adds to the toll it takes. Important to recognize these challenges and take care of self.

Getting help – need discussion within communities of educator, support and to learn from the model of “supervision” used in the therapeutic community. Encouragement and even institutional supports to help us take care of ourselves can model good practices for students and help instructors build on what they know they need.

For more information on issues of violence and learning and to join in discussion on the issues check out:
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