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One Child's Story of School-experienced Isolation and Rejection

Cover Page Footnote

One Child's Story of School-experienced Isolation and Rejection Gloria Gresham Stephen F. Austin State University

One Child's Story of School-Experienced Isolation and Rejection

Back and forth, up and down stomped a brown-eyed, petite child. It was recess time in this small, rural school. Most loved the break but not this child. Each day, this child endured 45 minutes of play while it appeared the teacher sat in a chair and chatted with her peers. As children were dismissed to play, clusters of boys and girls raced to the swings, monkey bars, slides, and dirt areas to play, all but the little girl. This small child was shunned from playing with the girls and banished from playing with the boys. Daily for the little girl, 45 excruciating minutes were often filled with running on the four-foot scalloped, rock fence surrounding the playground. Each time, the child approached a group to play, they would tell her, "Go away." Never did she cry; she just moved onto solitary activities.

The small-framed girl would probably be considered physically appealing by most adults. Her smile, at the rare times when you saw it, brightened her face. The child had big, brown eyes her parents called, "Cow eyes." They were her dominant feature and would have been considered beautiful by many if it were not for the problem. She was born with amblyopia, the lazy eye as many term it. Her left eye was nearly blind and drooped a bit. Since the age of two, her mother packed the car and traveled the 80-mile trip to the "big" town nearby to see her ophthalmologist. This trek was a long one for the girl but often brought her great joy. At age two, the doctor prescribed glasses with bottle-thick lenses. On the way home, the small child exclaimed with glee, "I see the leaves on the trees." Until this time, the girl lived in a world of blur.

About the time she was to enter school, the ophthalmologist decided that the lazy, left eye was just not straightening. So, he instructed her parents to ensure she wear a black, pirate-looking patch over her left eye; she would have to wear the patch every day. Not only did the

child wear the bottle-thick glasses, but now she had a pirate patch to boot! So, when she entered grade one in 1959, she was considered somewhat strange by her peers. It surprised her because apparently she seemed freaky to others. Glasses were her vision savior, and the patch, though a nuisance was her normal. The little girl had no idea she was different, not until this day, the day she entered first grade.

Beginning school for the first time usually brings mixed emotions in most children: delight, excitement, fear. So, it did for the little girl, but when she walked cheerfully onto the oil-stained, wood floors and gazed about the fresh faces, she was met with something she had never experienced: rejection and isolation! No one greeted her. No one ran to ask her to sit with them. No one made a friendly gesture, not even the teacher as the little child recalled.

Mornings were filled with “reading time” and “work time.” The child took to reading like a duck to water and was placed in the Blue Bird group, the top, you know. Her group met for a few minutes each day and engaged in “Round Robin” reading. If a child missed a word, the teacher barked out the word and all proceeded. This process was fine for the little girl except for when her page had the word “their,” her nemesis. Once the teacher was so proud of her “top” readers, she marched them across the hall to show off their prowess. And what do you know, “their” was on the little girl’s page. After sweating in her boots, suddenly, right before her eye, there was her nemesis. She blurted “their” perfectly and sighed with relief. So, “reading time” was pleasant enough, and after “reading time” she filled her time cutting and pasting in her Puzzle Pages workbook, alone.

After this morning ritual, lunch followed and the dreaded recess. Rejection and isolation became her usual, and the school afternoons and what activity she engaged in is hidden in the dark crevasses of her mind. The next memory escaping the brain’s locked cabinet is that of grade two.

On the wall, the teacher posted her “behavior chart.” The girl never had Xs written by her name because she never talked aloud. If the teacher noticed students talking, she marked a LARGE, BLACK X by their name. Those BIG, BLACK Xs terrified the girl. Almost the entire year, the chart revealed the girl’s name with no Xs. For it was not a problem for the little girl not to talk; who was she going to talk to? In this small school, there was one class per grade level, and unless someone moved, the same children grew up together. On this dreadful, humiliating day, the girl made one brief comment to the child next to her. The teacher saw her and quickly posted a BIG, BLACK X by her name. Tears welled up in her eyes and fell onto her cheeks. She had been noticed. She was caught talking. Now, all would see her ridiculed yet again.

The only other memory sneaking out about second grade is recess. Still the little girl ran along the stone fence or drew with a stick in the dirt without a friend in sight, but this teacher engaged with her students a little more than did the last teacher. This teacher believed in group games and probably intended to build community among her learners. So, from time to time when it was warm, the teacher insisted the children play some kind of game like Red Rover. Well, the girl’s humiliation was magnified during these fun, group times which were probably intended to bring the class together. The teacher had a strategy for forming teams. She chose two children as team captains. Never was the little girl a captain. Then, the captains chose, one by one, the members of their teams. Always the little girl was chosen last. When she was called to bat in a game of baseball, softball, or kickball, this was so frustrating because due to her eye sight, she usually missed the ball. “Strike one, two, three,” echoed.

Red Rover was even worse. The words still sound in her brain, “Red, Rover, Red Rover, let JoAnne come over.” “Red Rover, Red Rover, let Mitchell come over.” “Red Rover, Red Rover, let Katie come over.”

This went on for what seemed hours. All the time, the little girl was waiting fearfully and thinking, “Will I be called?” “When will I be called?” She pondered, “If my name is called, will I have the strength to break the hold of the team across the way?” Well, that was never a problem because she was almost never called! Recess time usually ceased before her time came. If the teacher ever noticed that the little girl was isolated time and time again, she never expressed this to the child. As far as the little girl remembered, the teacher never intervened to help her feel better or encouraged the other children to be more compassionate. This exclusion just continued and continued day after day.

Grade three was more of the same, but this grade presented the greatest trauma to date. Each year, the third grade performed as a rhythm band. Always in front of the band, stood the band leader draped in the most beautiful white and purple satin uniform. Atop the head of the band leader sat a beautiful, purple satin hat, and the leader directed with a baton. The little girl was in awe of this costume and really desired to be the band leader, but she never, ever thought she would be lucky enough. She was correct! For weeks, the third graders practiced learning to play their instruments: sticks, triangles, tambourines, drums, and cymbals. It was time to select the one who would be band leader. So, the teacher asked Katie to take over the baton. She did a good job. Next, the teacher asked the little girl to direct with the baton. She did a good job. The teacher was in a quandary. Who would she choose to lead the band? Both girls could do the job. Without thinking, she instituted what might be considered to some a fair way to solve the dilemma; she asked in the third grade class to vote. Of course, the children voted for Katie. As the teacher revealed the results, the girl sobbed for what seemed hours. Days of practice continued, and the little girl tried to exhibit a tough exterior while all the while she was crushed inside. She continued to ring her triangle in rhythm. I guess the teacher realized it was a crushing

blow to her not to lead the band so she knew she had a solution. The teacher allowed the tiny girl to move in front of the band to lead a couple of songs.

On the day of the show, Katie, the band leader, walked out in the exquisite purple and white, satin uniform and donned the purple, satin hat. In her hand was the sleek, pointed baton. Then, it was the little girl's time to lead. She moved to the front of the band in her old, worn blue skirt with the purple satin cape on that all of the band members wore. The little girl's baton was just one of the sticks that was used as an instrument. The girl wondered if the teacher thought this was equitable. The little girl was humiliated by what she felt was the teacher's inconsiderate attempt to appease her. Moving to the front of the band was never the point. There was a brilliantly clad bandleader, one that was chosen by her peers.

The next few years' memories have faded; only a few float to the surface. Girls came and went to slumber parties and overnight stays, but the little girl was rarely asked. As a matter of fact, in the seven years the little girl was in school, she was only invited three times to the homes of other girls. If birthday parties occurred for children in her class, the girl did not know about them. At school, academics remained pretty easy and recess a dread. The most vivid events occurring from grade four to seven was a tornado that turned the sky dark, grey-orange and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy when the girl was in the fifth grade. A horse-drawn carriage bearing the fallen president, his wife in a black-veiled outfit, missing a day of school, and John, John saluting his father as he was laid to rest is what the little girl remembers. All was about to change in the little girl's world!

During the summer from the seventh to the eighth grade, the girl experienced a great deal of transformation. Through family contacts, the girl developed a new friend from a town nearby. The girl and her friend's family traveled to Louisiana, Missouri, and Arkansas. Caves,

amusement parks, and mountains were her playground. She and her new friend walked, talked, dressed up, and played all summer long. It was the most wonderful feeling of freedom, freedom from the dread of isolation.

In between trips, the girl had the most magnificent visit to her ophthalmologist. She never anticipated the wonderful news. She looked through the funny-looking glasses, called out letters displayed on the screen, and endured the bright lights. This time was different. She felt it in the air. The doctor turned to the girl's parents and said, "She will need to come back in a year for an annual visit, and oh by the way, she does not need to wear her glasses anymore. Her eye is now straight, and the glasses have corrected the vision as much as it can be corrected."

"Not wear glasses," thought the girl; "I have worn glasses almost all of my life." So, she removed her glasses, handed them to her mother, and broke out into a gleaming smile.

During this same summer, integration hit. The school housing the children of color was turned into an elementary school. The old "white" school became the middle and high school, and all children were to go together in the fall. On television, the girl witnessed people screaming in chaos, police using tear gas, and people appearing to be out of control in Mississippi and Alabama when their schools were ordered to integrate. Even aware of this uproar, the girl gave it little thought. It appeared to the girl that all was calm in this little town because now the students would have more room, the football team could potentially be stronger, and money was consolidated.

It was time to enter grade eight. The girl's hair was longer, she had no glasses, and her body was beginning to curve in all the right places. So, when the girl walked into the eighth grade classroom, her "old" classmates did not recognize her. After all, she was gone most of the

summer. Many came up to introduce themselves. This was the same tiny girl that was rejected in grade one, two, three, four, five, six, and seven! The girl was getting along swimmingly with the “new” friends that moved from the school of color. This year when it was time to elect the class favorite, her “new” friends outnumbered the old ones, and the little girl, for the first time, was recognized as the class favorite. Still the undercurrents of rejection and isolation were in the air. She was not invited to all of the “old” friends’ parties because now the girl was thought to be pretty by most. Her “old” friends now rejected her for a different reason. She was not the ugly duckling with the bottle-thick glasses; she was a beautiful swan, and with beauty came jealousy!

Now, the girl experienced her female classmates spreading false rumors. Once, she was asked to spend the night with one of her “old” classmates. The classmate lived in the country near one of the male classmates. He was attracted to the girl, and the girl kind of liked him. So, the girl, the female classmate, the boy, and one of his friends all “rode around” with the female classmate’s older sister. This was when the girl received her first kiss. It was a sweet, short kiss, but it was a kiss. In her excitement, the girl shared with her classmate what had happened. Her classmate could not wait to return to school where she spread the rumor that the girl was “French” kissing the boy and “making out.” This was far from the truth; it was one sweet little peck! This kind of tale bearing happened over and over again.

At the end of grade eight, it was time for the teacher to choose a boy and a girl to serve on the high school Yearbook Committee. The Yearbook Committee worked annually to produce and sell the school yearbook. If you were placed on the Yearbook Committee as a freshman, you almost always worked your way up and became the yearbook editor as a senior. This was a prestigious position in the small school.

During the freshman year, the Yearbook Committee convened. At this meeting, the girl learned she was on the committee, but another girl from her class was placed in the prestigious position. The girl had been replaced! The boy chosen in grade eight remained, and his future would be Ad Manager. Never did the girl learn why she was removed. She remained on the committee but was only allowed to sell ads. From the girl's perspective, nothing had occurred to cause this event. Nothing had changed over the summer. This girl was a straight A student. She had no behavior issues. Because the girl was used to "bad" things happening to her, she just accepted it and wondered why. Had she offended someone? Had the teachers removed her for some reason? Was she not good enough? Did the high school Yearbook staff remove her? The questions were never answered.

High school, socially, was good. The girl learned she did not have to rely on her "old" classmates for companionship because high school was composed of a group of students in four grades. One could befriend people younger and older; it did not matter if your friends were in your class or not. So, this is just what the girl did. Also, since the girl had blossomed into a beautiful swan, boys began to notice her. So, she always had a boyfriend to take her here and there. The girl was very active in the band, basketball, cheerleading, twirling, and in a club called Future Homemakers of America. Isolation by her classmates really did not affect her; she was just used to it.

In high school, the girl experienced what felt like obvious teacher rejection. Even though, the girl was active in many school activities, she was not good at all of them. She was pretty good at playing her bass clarinet. She excelled in twirling and cheerleading. She was awful in basketball. After all, the girl only joined the basketball team because she wanted to go to the

“off” games on the bus. She was a bit uncoordinated and really did not understand the rules of basketball.

During basketball practice each day, the coach would work with his “stars” while his “ragnots” as he called them would be the team that the “stars” scrimmaged against. Of course, the girl was a “ragnot.” If the “stars” had a big game, the coach motivated them by saying something like this, “When I put in the “ragnots” in your last game, they out played you.” He never instructed the “ragnots.” He used to holler at the girl because she did not know what the word “screen” meant in basketball. Well, how would she know? No one ever taught her; she was a “ragnot.”

One time after basketball season, the coach created a track team for a district meet. They had never had a track team before, but this year they would compete. There was no practicing or reviewing of the rules of track. The team just donned their shorts, laced their tennis shoes, and traveled to the tournament. Well, the girl could run! It must have been a God-given talent. The coach even blurted out a rare compliment to the girl, “You run like a boy. Look at your stride!” At the tournament, the girl won a ribbon for running hurdles and a ribbon in the 880 relay. The track victory really did not mean much to the girl. She tried to melt into the wooden background when she had to walk on stage to pick up the ribbons. After the ceremony, she overheard teachers talking and discovered she was eligible to compete at the regional meet.

As the coach began to organize the team to practice for regionals, he called them one by one. He named all who had placed and were eligible, except for the girl. He even named one who did not place at the district meet to participate. Again, the girl was used to being rejected so she just thought she was not wanted. The girl he put in her place was one of his “stars.” He would take his “star” to regionals instead of the girl. For some reason this event made its way back to

the girl's grandfather. Boy, did he cause a ruckus! This coach was thought of in the town and in the local sports world as a great coach, but in the eyes of the girl, he was a little man who treated people with disrespect. In her mind, she was overtly rejected by her classmates, ignored by other teachers, and now rejected by one who was deemed as great.

In spite of the felt isolation and rejection, the girl graduated from high school, married, and participated in a career as an educator. In many ways, the girl was successful and in a nearby larger school district, she moved from teacher to counselor to administrator and ended a 30-year public school career. After this career, she moved to higher education, was a full professor, and served as assistant chair of her department. As one peers in from the outside, all looks well and good, but the woman carries the childhood scars of isolation and rejection. She never really trusts. She never really shares herself with others, but she really, really cares for and nurtures those in her charge. The brown-eyed, small-framed child who experienced rejection and isolation over and over again by classmates and teachers is me, the author of this article.

Children often participate in bullying and are physically and/or emotionally abusive to those deemed as "different" or weak. Even though not acceptable, the true villains in this story may be the adults who seemed to passively watch or who participated in the emotional abuse themselves. As I recall, the adults rarely did anything to ease my pain. I do not even remember one educator talking to me about how I felt, encouraging me in any endeavor overtly, or arranging a way to support me in my struggles with rejection or isolation except for the time my third grade teacher allowed me to lead a couple of songs for the rhythm band performance. This strategy seemed shallow to me. Now, I wonder if they even knew I was experiencing such behavior and such emotional stress.

As educators, we are to protect the safety and welfare of children. Scars of social and emotional abuse never go away. They linger and change one forever. So as the little girl who experienced such pain, I invite educators to watch for signs of rejection and isolation. Initiate meaningful strategies to support children who are victims of such acts. Go that extra mile to observe and analyze the social interactions of your students.