

## Answering the Call: Evaluation and Shame in Schools

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Casey S. Smith's "The Call from Inside the House: Shame, School, and Self-Misinformation" is a compelling look at the link between schooling practices, shame, misinformation, and student identity.<sup>1</sup> Drawing on Krista Thomason's conception of shame as a disconnect between one's self-conception and one's socially-constructed identity, Smith argues that the information that students get about themselves at school and how they get that information can create feelings of shame that warp their self-conceptions and identities to serve as "misinformation" about who they really are and what they are capable of.<sup>2</sup> To illustrate this process, Smith describes a student who works hard in her chemistry class but gets a D, thereby experiencing shame and internalizing the idea that she isn't good at the subject. The D grade contradicts the student's self-conception: she originally believed herself to be smart and hardworking, but now internalizes the feeling that she is "stupid" and "unworthy of success." These feelings are incorrect—they are misinformation—and risk becoming overpowering elements of the student's self-conception, limiting what she sees herself as capable of in the future. I want to parse out this scenario a bit more because I think it can tell us important information about the relationship between evaluation, shame, and self-conception in schooling. Smith's idea in this paper is compelling and worth making more precise by analyzing what about the experience of evaluation creates shame, and what schools can do to change or mitigate it.

Grades, at their most basic level, are a way of communicating information. They communicate information about student evaluation, and they are designed to do so in stark terms. To help parse out this relationship more clearly, we can think about two possibilities for the information that the D grade provides to this student. Either the information is correct, or it's incorrect.

First, it's possible that the information communicated by the D grade is correct: the student did not do well in her Chemistry class, and this grade

correctly sheds light on a disconnect between the student's self-conception and her Chemistry class performance. Maybe she thinks she understands the material but has major misunderstandings about it. Maybe she thinks she put in enough effort but was off base about the time and energy it truly would take to do well in this course. In these scenarios, the "D" communicates correct information to the student that, though painful to hear, the student might need or even want to have. It's helpful to have accurate information about whether or not you're good at something: it can help you know what to improve on and make decisions about future plans. It can even be motivating. The question is whether the student experiences shame as a result of learning this correct information. Experiencing some shame—some feeling of disconnect between who you thought you were and how others actually perceive or assess you—can be a healthy self-corrective (Smith, through Thomason, notes this is the traditional conception of shame).<sup>3</sup> The question then becomes one of resilience or perseverance, or what Smith calls "the ability to navigate and challenge shame." Does the student take this experience of shame and move forward from it to reconcile her self-conception with this evaluative information? Or does she, as Smith describes, internalize the *correct* information and *turn it into a larger, incorrect self-conception* about her identity as a scientist, or student, or person more broadly?

Another possibility is that the information is correct and the student experiences no shame. Given Smith's analysis, this would likely mean that "being good at Chemistry" or "being hardworking" wasn't part of the student's self-conception to begin with, so the "D" information creates no disconnect for her. We might have reason to be concerned about this student—we want them to flourish, and being hardworking and perseverant are dispositions that can help them reach many individual and social goals.<sup>4</sup> But on the other hand, we may not need to be concerned about the student. She may not be ashamed of doing poorly in Chemistry because she feels like there are other aspects of her self-conception—other things she feels good at, other things she cares about—that this data point does not disrupt. I'll return to this later, as a way to loop back to Smith's final argument about community.

Second, we must consider the possibility that the information com-

municated by the D grade is incorrect or untrue. This seems to be what Smith assumes in her scenario. The student has worked hard and has some capacity for Chemistry, yet somehow—possibly because grades are flawed, socially constructed, limited forms of evaluation—receives an evaluation that misinforms her she is bad at Chemistry and bad at being a student.<sup>5</sup> The student may not experience shame in this scenario. She may recognize that grades are flawed, and that one grade—one flawed data point—really doesn't tell her much about herself as a learner or a scientist. She may perceive that her teacher actually wasn't very well-versed in the material, and that it wasn't her fault that she didn't learn much in the course.<sup>6</sup> She may see the grade as unfair, but not as a rupture between her self-conception and her social identity. In this case, this isn't a *good* situation—it's an unfair and possibly unjust one—but it doesn't result in *internal misinformation* for the student. On the other hand, the student may move through the process that Smith describes in this example: she receives the incorrect information, experiences shame, and has no corrective to prevent that shame from growing into a "misinformed opinion of herself" in the short term and imposter syndrome or other destructive "feelings of deficiency" in the long term.<sup>7</sup> This is an especially bad outcome.

By parsing through this scenario, we gain a bit more precision about how harmful shame can develop through evaluation processes in schooling. The evaluation itself is not necessarily the problem: evaluation is a necessary and important part of schooling. Sometimes, it can create feelings of shame. Shame itself is also not necessarily the problem. Shame itself may be an important corrective social tool that helps students change their behavior to align their self-conception with how they are perceived by others, or it may cause significant harm: in reviewing the philosophical literature on shame, Smith sums it up as a "complex and unpredictable experience."<sup>8</sup> The problem with evaluation, shame, and misinformation occurs if (a) the information is correct and the student internalizes it beyond its intended use, or (b) the information is incorrect and the student does not perceive that it's incorrect.

Smith suggests that the corrective in this scenario, and in scenarios of internalized school-based shame more broadly, is to connect the student to

larger communities where she can collect many data points about herself, experience multiple visions of herself, and come to understand that “her identity is broader than just what she feels on the inside.” I wholeheartedly agree with this corrective. However, I want to suggest a caveat to that corrective as well as a potential second corrective based on my analysis.

First, community connection needs to mean more than the participation in extracurricular spaces that Smith describes in the paper. Participation in extracurriculars can exacerbate feelings of shame and isolation instead of mitigating them: sports teams, clubs, music ensembles, and other activities can be just as full of shameful evaluative experiences and peer competition as content classes. What matters is the climate of school spaces generally, particularly the creation of environments where it’s ok to fail and students are expected to try new things and support each other in doing so. These sorts of environments are what mitigate against the over-internalization of harmful shame or incorrect information about oneself, not the variety of community experiences alone.

Second, along with creating supportive school communities where students are seen as more than their grades, teachers can work on improving the accuracy and communication of their evaluation systems. When grades or other forms of evaluation communicate correct information clearly and with an attitude of respect, they can support students’ reception and navigation of accurate, if jarring, information about themselves. To limit self-internalized shame in schools, teachers and administrators have a responsibility to examine and reform grading practices.

Smith is right to argue that student self-misinformation can arise through shaming schooling practices and should be an important concern for educators. Through philosophy of education, we can get precise about the problems of shame and self-misinformation in schools: what those shaming schooling practices really are and the specific scenarios in which they lead to student self-misinformation. This analysis can help educators pinpoint more precise ways to support students in developing authentic and resilient senses of self.

## REFERENCES

- 1 Casey S. Smith, “The Call from Inside the House: Shame, School, and Self-Misinformation,” 2024, <https://doi.org/10.47927/80.2.218>.
- 2 Krista K. Thomason, *Naked: The Dark Side of Shame and Moral Life* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2018).
- 3 Smith, “The Call from Inside the House: Shame, School, and Self-Misinformation,” p. 3.
- 4 Jennifer M. Morton, “Molding Conscientious, Hardworking, and Perseverant Students,” *Social Philosophy and Policy* 31, no. 1 (2014): 60–80, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0265052514000119>.
- 5 Joe Feldman, *Grading for Equity: What It Is, Why It Matters, and How It Can Transform Schools and Classrooms*, Second edition (Thousand Oaks, California: Corwin, 2024).traditional (A - F
- 6 For an illustration of this scenario, see Meira Levinson, “Promotion or Retention?” in *Dilemmas of Educational Ethics: Cases and Commentaries*, ed. Meira Levinson and Jacob Fay (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard Education Press, 2016).
- 7 Smith, “The Call from Inside the House: Shame, School, and Self-Misinformation,” p. 4
- 8 Smith, “The Call from Inside the House: Shame, School, and Self-Misinformation,” p. 5.