

The Mindful Teacher

reviewed by Daniel Liston — March 08, 2010

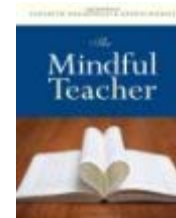
Title: The Mindful Teacher

Author(s): Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley

Publisher: Teachers College Press, New York

ISBN: 0807750190, **Pages:** 112, **Year:** 2009

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What is “mindful teaching”? It entails, as Elizabeth MacDonald and Dennis Shirley explain, an “openness to new information, a willingness to explore topics that are marginalized in the dominant reform fads of the moment, and a readiness to review one’s previous assumptions as a part of a life-long career marked by critical inquiry, reflection and compassion” (p. 27). That definition seems reminiscent of reflective teaching. It certainly appears related.¹ But there seem to be qualitative differences between reflective teaching and mindful teaching. Within the last decade a body of literature has blossomed; it is a literature that borrows from western and eastern contemplative traditions, underscores the role of the self and emotions in teaching, and attempts to consider the conflicts, conundrums, and paradoxes of teaching. Parker Palmer (1998), Irene McHenry and Richard Brady (2009), Rachael Kessler (2000), Linda Lantieri (2001), and Maria Lichtman (2005) are a few of the authors who have ventured into these dimensions of vocational exploration. It is a growing literature and one worth examining. Within this space MacDonald and Shirley, a public school teacher and an academic respectively, offer valuable insights and a description of an unusual program.

The Mindful Teacher is a syncretistic account of a particular approach to teaching and teacher development. Its strengths lie in the distinct and rich orientations it blends, a concern for the practical and emotional challenges of teaching, and an emphasis on, and articulation of, a contemplative educational practice. Its weaknesses will not be surprising. Syncretistic accounts sometimes lack conceptual richness and depth; and this work is no different. At times MacDonald and Shirley offer what amounts to lists of strategies, synergies, and tensions rather than a rich exploration of those themes and elements. But this weakness comes with the terrain and doesn’t substantially detract from their contributions. Their story is valuable and one worth significant discussion. MacDonald and Shirley conceived and created a series of Saturday seminars which attempted to put into practice their developing conception of mindful teaching.

At the basis of their work is a commitment to professional learning communities engaged in individual and collaborative reflection; Ellen Langer’s psychological construct of mindfulness emphasizing openness to new categories and information and an awareness of more than one perspective; and Thich Nhat Hanh’s notion of “engaged Buddhism” and delineation of mindfulness meditation practices. MacDonald and Shirley write that:

Our contention is that education can really improve only when teachers themselves have opportunities to become more reflective of the multiple pressures upon them and collaborate to build professional learning communities that promote deep and sustained thinking and analysis about the many problems in schools, and especially those in urban settings.

Reformers often want teachers all to “be on the same page” and to “get everyone on board” but the reality is that educators have very different, and sometimes opposing, philosophies of education that often originate in their different life experiences.

Educators need activity settings in which to explore those differences and to discern both their benefits as well as their potential costs. Rather than suppressing their differences, teachers need ways of bringing them to light, discussing their strengths and potential weaknesses, and making them pedagogically generative. (pp 26-27)

Believing that much of public school instruction can adequately be depicted as “alienated teaching,” a form of instruction that arises when teachers bow to external cultural and institutional forces that go against their best instructional and curricular judgments, MacDonald and Shirley created a structure of mindfulness seminars. With these weekend seminars (no more than 15 participants per seminar) they attempted to create a setting of reflective mindfulness, emphasizing eight elements. These elements include: attention to teachers’ pressing concerns; highlighting topics of vulnerability to teachers; examining the scholarly research on a topic; practicing formal meditation; small group discussions on the psychological intrusions that occurred while meditating; a further refocusing on the problems uncovered; an extended debriefing followed by meditative mindfulness assignments for “everyday” life.

Following this structural elaboration of the Saturday seminars, MacDonald and Shirley offer six illustrations of the various ways

these Saturday seminars were experienced by participating teachers. In this section of the book they describe Olivia Jones, who experienced the seminars as validating. They enabled her to “break out of her defensive formations to acknowledge the complexity of the social situation in which she was living” (p.42). They introduce Grace Napolitano who found in the seminars a kind of emotional support and “therapy” that “helped her to understand that her difficulties with behavioral management were not of her own making, but had to do with the manner in which her classroom was “stacked” with students” whose emotional and behavioral needs were greatest” (p. 53). MacDonald and Shirley offer nuanced and rich stories. However, as I read those narratives I wondered (as a researcher) how the illustrations were constructed: Who was telling these stories? Were there other accounts of the participants’ experiences which were not as overwhelmingly positive as the ones included? and What were the obstacles encountered in these seminars by participants and facilitators? As a facilitator of similar groups, I found many of the themes familiar and vocationally powerful. Throughout the United States a number of kindred professional development programs are developing.² These sorts of descriptive testimonials can provide powerful illumination, and as researchers and practitioners we should not rely on testimonials alone. More extensive and sophisticated research on these sorts of professional development efforts is needed to explore their conceptual dimensions and their professional manifestations.

MacDonald and Shirley close their book with an elaboration of the “seven synergies of mindful teaching” as well as the “triple tensions” that accompany the terrain of their approach to teaching. The synergies represent essential tenets of their meditation practice and underscore the importance of such elements as a caring and loving disposition, authentic vocational alignment, and educators’ collective responsibility. The three tensions represent a recognition that persistent educational dilemmas exist and in a very real sense cannot be overcome. Accordingly they note the tensions between contemplation and action, the moral path and the powerful route, and the individual and the collective realms of action. Conceptually the authors’ delineation does not cover new territory. That’s not this work’s strength. MacDonald and Shirley offer the reader a rich description and examination of one professional development program - one that takes teachers’ dissatisfactions to heart; provides a framework for contemplative and deliberative exploration; and recognizes the transformative capacity and inherent limitations of any human, educational, and institutional endeavor. They enrich the reflective teacher terrain by bringing to the arena an explicit contemplative framing, a concern for practical and pragmatic resolutions to some of the headaches and heartaches teachers encounter, and an appreciation for the educational research literature. It is a work for both the newcomer and those experienced with contemplative educational orientations.

Notes

1. See Tremmel for connections between reflective practice and contemplation.
2. Three established programs come to mind: The Center for Courage and Renewal (<http://www.couragerenewal.org/>); the Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques in Education <http://www.smart-in-education.org/>; and PassageWorks (<http://passageworks.org/>).

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: March 08, 2010
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 15933, Date Accessed: 10/13/2015 5:05:07 PM

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