

THE

**MINDFUL
TEACHER**

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ramifications. But much of the dominant rhetoric of pupil achievement today suggests that they should indeed be so driven, thereby extending and exacerbating the phenomenon of alienated teaching.

MINDFUL TEACHING

To overcome alienated teaching, we will propose in this book an alternative conception of “mindful teaching,” in which teachers struggle to attain congruence, integrity, and efficacy in their practice. Mindful teaching, in this account, is not a program that can be purchased, a recipe that can be followed, or a “silver bullet” that can be fired into your instruction to raise your test scores. Rather, it is a form of teaching that is informed by contemplative practices and teacher inquiry that enables teachers to interrupt their harried lifestyles, come to themselves through participation in a collegial community of inquiry and practice, and attend to aspects of their classroom instruction and pupils’ learning that ordinarily are overlooked in the press of events.

As is the case with alienated teaching, mindful teaching can take a variety of forms. We explore these here not through prescription but through description and analysis. The heart of the discussion takes place in an investigation of six “anchoring illustrations” of mindful teaching in Chapter 3 and “seven synergies” and “triple tensions” of mindful teaching in Chapter 4.

THE MINDFUL TEACHER SEMINARS

From whence do we derive our data for our descriptions of alienated and mindful teaching? For the past 4 years we have led a series of seminars entitled “The Mindful Teacher” that has enabled us to gather together two cohorts of urban public school teachers in Boston to inquire into their craft. Abandoning orthodox professional development structures and appropriating participatory research strategies that would provide multiple opportunities for teachers themselves to generate new findings (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1993, 2009), we determined at the outset that we would not articulate pre-established outcomes for the seminar. Rather, our goal would be to establish maximum openness for teachers to identify and to explore collaboratively what *they* experience as core dilemmas and problems in their practice; to address the whole host of issues that emerge in the urban environment that make it difficult for their pupils to excel; and to keep a fluid structure so that new topics could emerge continually

in which they lived. I was impressed when I learned that more than half of my students were bilingual, speaking both their native language and English. There were several occasions when I was invited into the homes of my students for dinner during which I experienced the warmth and hospitality of parents, siblings, and often extended family members. Due to busing in the district, many of my students were living in different sections of the city, and as I visited their homes or their after-school programs, I would find myself discovering tight-knit communities I had never known in the city. My ignorance of urban children and their environments slowly was transforming into knowledge of a variety of languages, cultures, and family structures.

At the same time, there were some exasperating discoveries, including the fact that even though district mandates required the school to have a full-time aide in my inclusion classroom, no such aide was forthcoming in the cash-strapped district. This was the case even though I had one student with severe infant fetal alcohol syndrome who regularly wandered out of my class and generally operated with the cognitive abilities of a 3-year-old. I discovered that one mother of a child in my class was being beaten by her husband, a professional who worked at a local university; I then helped the mother and her child to enter a women's shelter. I wondered why one boy was a perpetual torment to other children in class, but upon driving him to his after-school "program," I was stunned to drop him off in a crowded tenement with roughly 15 children in it and one healthcare "provider" who spoke only Spanish (while the boy spoke only English).

Highly motivated to continue and improve my teaching, I subsequently entered a masters program and became certified in elementary education. I was completely immersed in teaching at this point. I would meet with literacy coaches at coffee shops on weekends; I spent hours shopping for materials in teacher resource stores; and I attended as many workshops as I could.

I had learned and was practicing every new teaching strategy I could get my hands on and I felt that things looked the way that they should in my classroom. Still, I wasn't confident that my students were learning at an appropriate rate. Nonetheless, I did feel validated in 1999, when I was honored as one of five district teachers who received a Resident Teacher Award for exemplary practices.

Outside of my BPS world, I began engaging in community organizing projects with grass-roots organizations in Boston and developed professional development workshops on literacy in collaboration with the Massachusetts Department of Education that exposed me to a wide range of educators and policy makers throughout the northeast. I continued

Practicing Mindfully

THUS FAR WE have set up an opposition between *alienated* teaching—which is coercive, privatized, and resented—and *mindful* teaching—which is integrative, reflective, and deep. But it may not be so easy to move from one experience of teaching to the other, and our criticism of alienated teaching might be more easily stated than avoided. German philosopher of education Lothar Klingberg (1990) argued in his theory of “dialectical didactics” that there are always power asymmetries at work in education and that students and teachers, even if they might long for deeper and more authentic relationships, often cannot resist tendencies to objectify and to a certain extent instrumentalize one another. The tradition of Socratic dialogues has long held that a moment of alienation in the form of cognitive dissonance is crucial to get learners out of their comfort zone and open to new ideas. And we know from many years of experiments in groupwork in social change organizations that even when individuals have the best of intentions and the most emancipatory social justice goals, subtle differences in styles of communication—such as tone of voice, eye contact, and other forms of body language—have powerful influences in how groups evolve (Pallotta, 2004).

Of course, the Mindful Teacher seminars that we established had no magic potions to offer in regard to these seemingly intractable dilemmas. Nor did we promise to concoct such potions. Rather, we wanted to *be-friend* the complex and the intractable, anticipating that perhaps if we changed our frame of reference, we might come to understand our own teaching and learning differently, and could convey that new understanding to children in rewarding ways.

To help you to understand how we endeavored to do this, and with what consequences and outcomes, we will now

- Describe the *eightfold structure* of the Mindful Teacher seminars;
- Identify *ten clusters of questions* engendered through seminar discussions;

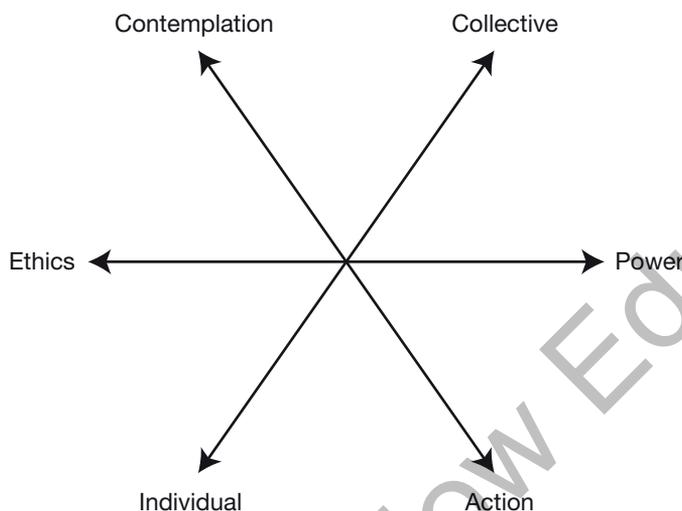
Karyn's response to this situation was to set up a "quiet table" where children could be in a safe and semiprivate place when there was too much stimulation in the class and they needed their own area. She was delighted when Cecilia responded positively to the table and would use it to write what she was feeling inside. Karyn found that Cecilia wrote about how she missed her mother and how she wished that she could talk with her and go shopping with her and do all of the normal kinds of activities that girls love to do with their mothers. Karyn's heart went out to her, and she tried to encourage Cecilia that one day things would get better, although she herself didn't know what the future really would hold for her.

Karyn's creative response of setting up a special writing area for Cecilia did not stop her incidences of leaving the classroom without a moment's notice. But Karyn did notice a real change, because Cecilia began coming back to the classroom of her own accord and then heading straight to the quiet table, where she would write what she was feeling. Cecilia was beginning to find her own way of dealing with her emotions and impulsiveness, and while Karyn still didn't like it that she would leave the classroom, she came to expect that Cecilia would return on her own—and her expectations were fulfilled.

Karyn's case illustrates some of the real pain and uncertainty that can accompany mindful teaching. Teachers often are in situations where no one can really help them. Administrators are too busy or are unavailable; their fellow teachers have their own classes and can't leave them when a crisis occurs; parents and paraprofessionals are in and out of buildings and can't be relied upon to be magically available when the unexpected occurs. Instead, teachers have to fall back on their own intuition and best guesses of ways to respond to children. This loneliness of teaching carries enormous emotional costs for teachers. For Karyn, it was especially hard to hold out hope for Cecilia—she herself had always had a very close relationship with her own mother and could hardly begin to imagine how much it must hurt to have one's mother in jail—but she knew that it was her personal and professional responsibility to keep hoping in spite of the odds. Truly, one has no choice to stop hoping—for without that, one becomes part of a problem rather than a solution in children's lives.

LEARNING FROM THE SIX ILLUSTRATIONS

What do we learn from our six anchoring illustrations of what we are calling mindful teaching? If you are a classroom teacher, we anticipate that as you read through the cases, you found many ways that you could

Figure 4.2. The Triple Tensions of Mindful Teaching

rarely becoming part of formal daily practices. When teachers like Olivia, Renee, and Jeff took on extra projects and tasks that truly served their pupils, that extra time took away from restorative time they needed to shelter and attend to their private lives. Teachers would promise themselves that they would stop work each evening by 7:00 but still be going for hours afterward.

As seminar leaders, we did not know how to resolve the tensions that teachers experienced between the needs of their pupils and their own needs for well-rounded private lives. Many reformers would argue that of course the needs of the pupils come first—but then the same reformers seem puzzled by the horrific rates of teachers leaving the profession. Too many of our seminar discussions came to involve questions of how much longer individuals could remain in the urban classroom. Our role became that of compassionate allies who sought to establish a precarious balance between the needs of the pupils for learning and the needs of the teacher for a profession that invites not 3 years of idealism followed by burnout and exit, but long-term sustainable growth and fulfillment.

The second tension of mindful teaching is *the tension between ethics and power*. Mindful ethics require us to treat others as their own ends and not as instruments for securing our own status or privilege. Here is a point of convergence between Western and Eastern ethics, as expressed, for example, by Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative on the one hand and

Mindful Teacher Leadership

ONE OF THE greatest challenges for teacher leadership today was formulated many years ago by Michael Huberman (1993), who found that when teachers reflected on their careers at the stage of retirement, those who reported the most fulfilment were those who had sheltered themselves from larger school reform initiatives. Those with the most frustration were those who had tried to change system-level policies and had been thwarted in their efforts. This finding, which subsequently has become known as the “Huberman paradox” (Little & Bartlett, 2002, p. 352), and its ramifications have troubled teacher leaders and educational change advocates ever since. For if teachers do not step forth and begin to lead change processes, can teaching ever truly become a profession? Without scaffolded opportunities for teachers to lead, are teachers forever doomed to fall back to the unholy trinity of conservatism, presentism, and privatism described in Chapter 1?

Our findings from the Mindful Teacher project are cautiously optimistic on this account. When Lortie wrote *Schoolteacher* in the 1970s and when Huberman conducted his studies in the 1980s, there was little momentum to foster teachers as researchers or as leaders. Yet in the years since, there has been a sea change in education. While efforts to develop teachers as researchers and leaders often are subject to the usual spasmodic, stop-and-go patterns endemic in educational change, we now are in an altogether different era. School districts all over the nation support teachers’ professional learning communities. Teachers are acquiring opportunities for differentiated roles such as literacy or math coaches in their buildings, and the revolution in information technology has enabled teachers to network with colleagues from across the country and indeed around the world on everything from effective teaching strategies for autistic children to multicultural education. An increasing amount of educational change is transnational in scope, enabling educators to learn from their colleagues not just down the hall or in a neighboring district, but also from other nations in locations as far removed as Finland, Japan, and Singapore.