

Practicing Presence

Simple Self-Care Strategies for Teachers



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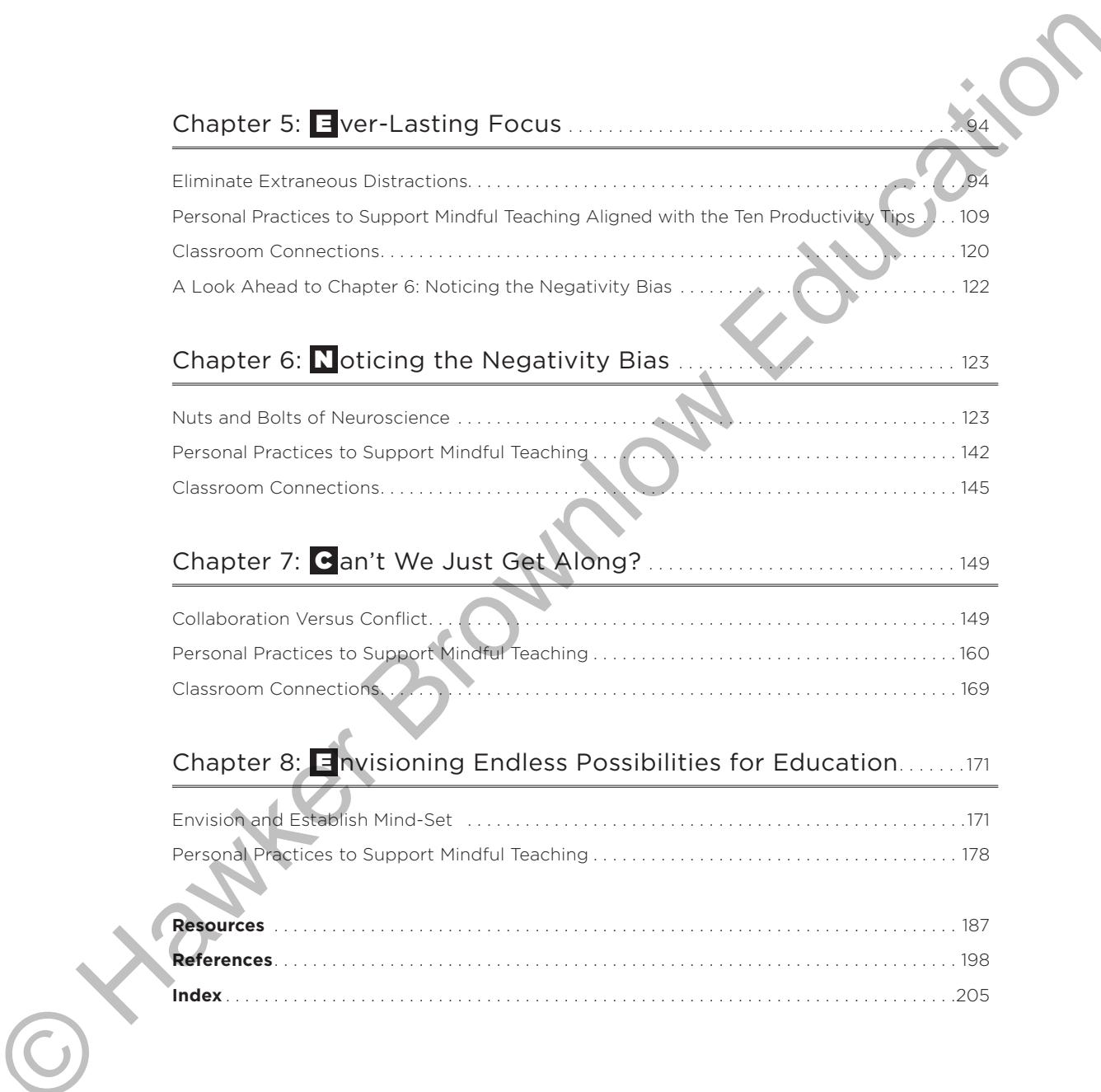
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INTRODUCTION

The Practice of Presence: Paths to Mindful Teaching

Some teachers, when you watch them teach, radiate an inner light, and you can feel that they are completely present for their students. These teachers rarely have classroom management issues, they bring happiness to the classroom, and it's clear they love what they do. Why aren't all teachers like that? How did they get like that? How can you become a teacher like that? Weren't we all like that once? This book is about kindling or rekindling that state.

For more than two decades, I've studied presence. I've read hundreds of books and articles by academic researchers, writers in the field of psychology, ancient scholars, and current neurologists. I've attended and presented multiple workshops on the topic of presence in school districts, child care settings, and educational conferences. Most importantly, I'm still on the journey to live in the present moment myself. The old adage is true: you teach what you need to learn. I've learned that cultivating presence is clearly an inside job. It begins with bringing

attention to your own thoughts and feelings. You have to notice things, be curious, and be willing to question your beliefs. It is from a place of presence that a peaceful perception of the world arises.

This book is an invitation to learn to fully inhabit the present moment.

What you have in your hands is a resource for *you*. It's the glue that holds all the swirling components of being an exceptional teacher together; it will help hold *you* together. It will help counterbalance the more difficult demands of teaching, which encompass the ever-changing standards, the eternally revised curriculum, report cards, and assessments. The strategies in this book can help you put the classroom management dilemmas, the endless committee work, and the student, colleague, and parent challenges into perspective so that you can be a quiet presence of contentment, no matter what chaos comes your way. By coupling what's in this book with your own considerable inner resources, you can revamp your daily routines and become more present.

This book provides pathways to presence. Similar to routes on a map, there are multiple pathways to get to a specific destination. Each chapter of this book will explore different topics and offer distinctive strategies, and as a reader, you'll choose which path you might want to explore.

Think of presence as a cousin of mindfulness meditation, which had its origins over 2,500 years ago. Prince Siddhartha, who became the Buddha, dedicated his life to finding the cause of suffering and recommended mindfulness as a way of overcoming grief, sorrow, pain, and anxiety. In 1979, mindfulness was used therapeutically by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn and colleagues at the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Hospital. In addition, mindfulness is currently being taught in Fortune 500 companies, in the military, in hospitals, and even in the world of politics.

Mindful seems to be the word of the moment, and mindfulness in education has exploded. This text is unique in that it takes mindfulness a step further and heads down a slightly different path. Mindfulness is being aware of your thoughts and being content with whatever is. When your thoughts run rampant, you redirect your attention and bring your mind back to the present moment. However, I've found that sometimes my thoughts about the present moment aren't so blissful. This is where some of my practices take a slight detour from traditional mindfulness. I have found that reframing *some* of those thoughts are helpful. The moment that you are aware of a negative thought, it sometimes helps to reach for a more positive one. I once heard someone say, "My mind is like a bad neighborhood. I don't like to go there alone." When I find myself in "my bad neighborhood," I head down another path.

For this reason, I use the word *presence* instead of *mindfulness*. *Presence*, as used in this text, is a secular, informal term, intended to be applicable to daily life.

Practicing presence has elements of cognitive behavior therapy. Once I'm present, I can shine a light on inaccurate or negative thinking to view a challenging situation more clearly and respond rather than react. I believe that a combination of strategies allows individuals to choose the approach that works best for them at any given moment. Just as we differentiate instruction for students, mindfulness tools should be differentiated for educators. Learning how to assess your situation and select an appropriate tool for change to rekindle that present, calm state takes practice.

Practicing presence gives us the ability to anchor ourselves so we aren't carried away by the ever-changing challenges of being an educator. A lot of those challenges have to do with our rampant thoughts. Our thoughts become our words, our words reflect our beliefs, and our beliefs drive our actions.

If you picked up this book because you are tired, wired, and running in circles, you need to know you are not alone.

Approximately 50 percent of new teachers leave the education field before they hit the five-year mark. Moreover, the attrition rates of first-year teachers have increased by about one-third in the past two decades. So, not only are more beginners entering the teaching force, but these beginners are also less likely to stay in teaching. If you are a veteran teacher, congratulate yourself for remaining in this profession; thankfully, you are one of many dedicated, caring teachers who make a difference. Students need you. However, you need to take as good care of yourself as you do your students—actually better. Making your own self-care a priority is the opposite of selfish; it allows you to be more present and supportive of others, and more content in your work.

The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimated that the cost of turnover among public school teachers in the United States is more than \$7.3 billion a year. That's not taking into account the money recent graduates invested in their college educations to become teachers and the loans they have incurred. That \$7.3 billion number also does not include the amount of *time* it takes administrators to interview and train new teachers.

A recent survey conducted by the National Center for Educational Statistics suggests that an exceedingly high percentage of teachers who abandoned their careers may have entered the teaching profession underprepared, overwhelmed, and undersupported—resulting in frustrated teachers who became discouraged after only a few years. What does every student need to be well adjusted and happy? Not discouraged, frustrated teachers. Students need

well-adjusted, happy teachers. The greatest gift you can give to your students is your authentic presence. Classrooms should be places where teachers and students can learn, dream, create, and be themselves.

No matter how many times the pendulum swings in education, we know that focusing on the whole child makes sense. Focusing on the whole teacher makes sense as well. This book explores multiple aspects of a teacher's life, including topics that are rarely addressed in teacher preparation, induction, or professional development programs.

Numerous books and programs address the training of teachers, but most focus primarily on pedagogy and curriculum. This book focuses not on *doing*, but rather on *being*—*being* present. The reality is that programs and curriculum don't teach; teachers teach. The teacher is the determining factor in student achievement. It's time we began to focus on the variable that matters most: the teacher.

How to Navigate This Book

This book is a compilation of simple strategies and resources for educators to manage being overwhelmed, written in an informal, conversational tone. My goal is to keep it simple. Knowledge is power, but the real change is in the implementation of knowledge and information. Each chapter contains research and reflections, but the essence of the book is in the section on personal practices to support mindful teaching. The action is where we implement the strategies, which is where the change happens.

The acronym PRESENCE is used to divide the text into eight chapters.

Here is a sneak peak at the chapters ahead:

P Chapter 1, “Practicing Presence,” opens with an overview of the concept of presence and an explanation of what being present can do for us as teachers and the impact our presence can have on students. A prioritizing tool precedes an overview of the benefit of purposeful planning and prioritizing. We dabble with a minimediation (a four-minute presence pause), and then the chapter concludes with classroom connections, an opportunity to change the lens of how we see our classrooms.

R Chapter 2, “Responding Rather Than Reacting,” explores happiness, the power of adopting gratitude habits into our daily lives, mindlessness, and the benefits of rest and renewal. We continue with meditation and relaxation exercises, and we close with purposeful planning, this time focusing on the end of our day.

E Chapter 3, “Epigenetics: Ever Heard of It?,” introduces a complex term—*epigenetics*—and translates it into practical, clear language so that we understand how the body works with stress and begin to better regulate stressful responses by being aware of our mind-set. This sets the stage for our next chapter, simple self-care.

S Chapter 4, “Simple Self-Care,” begins with a work stress self-assessment, then transitions into finding time for self-care, including more present moment practice. The personal practices section has a range of strategies, concluding with a loving kindness meditation.

E Chapter 5, “Ever-Lasting Focus,” dispels the myth of multitasking and provides ways to focus our attention and energy as well as cope with information overload. Slowing down and the power of no set the stage for the personal practices section with ten productivity tips.

N Chapter 6, “Noticing the Negativity Bias,” takes another scientific term, *neuroplasticity*, and breaks it down into teacher-friendly language. How to adopt a growth mind-set and raise our happiness set point leads into coaching actions that focus on documenting and appreciating the good, as well as incorporating relaxation techniques seamlessly into our day.

C Chapter 7, “Can’t We Just Get Along?,” explores work relationships and how to deal with difficult personalities. The focus is on creating a collaborative culture by cultivating a complaint/gossip-free environment. Mindful listening and the value of silence are introduced along with appreciative interviews.

E Chapter 8, “Envisioning Endless Possibilities for Education,” begins with a portrait of a present teacher and helps us imagine the possibilities that exist once we’ve established healthy mind-sets. This chapter encourages us to not only dream ourselves, but also to ignite a vision in others.

The following elements appear throughout the book:

Quotes and Affirmations: Affirmations and applicable quotes are dispersed throughout the text.

Research and Reflection: The research is what thought leaders in the field have discovered; the reflection is what I have experienced based on applying the research. I have found the most current reputable research and translated it from theory to practice by demonstrating how it applies to my own life.

Paths to Mindful Teaching: These action-oriented suggestions help readers integrate the theory into their busy days; it's the *how to* bridge the research to action. It takes personal planning to implement these strategies. Anyone can read about a strategy and it can sound good, but no change happens until you take action. The action is where the change happens, not in the reading, thinking, or even the understanding. There is never just one way to do something, and the coaching suggestions are for guidance only. The more you try the various practices, the more you'll customize them, almost like your own individualized coaching plan.

Classroom Connections: How the concepts in the text connect to the pre-K-12 classroom will be shared through supplemental sources, links, and websites related to various chapter topics.

At the end of the book is a section of resources that includes websites and additional resources to support the topic.

I have learned that when we care for ourselves, deeply and deliberately, we are able to care for others—our students, our friends and families—in a healthier, more authentic way. I have used the techniques in this book to become more present in my own life. It takes commitment, but the results are worth it. I invite you to suspend judgment and venture onto a path—approaching your life fully immersed in the present moment.

Practicing Presence

Pause, Plan, and Prioritize

2000—Become less stressed. Don't take on too much. Calm down; your plate is too full. You are too hard on yourself. Listen to people more closely and be more attentive. Slow down, relax, and listen. You're always in a major rush and running late, unapproachable. Take your time; stop rushing around and trying to do too much.

This was some of the advice given to me by my supervisors, family, and colleagues in the fall of 2000. I was on sabbatical from my position as a first-grade teacher. After fourteen years in the classroom, I was exploring teacher leadership opportunities. Enrolled in an organizational leadership program, I was taking a course on leadership and ethics. One of the course assignments was to solicit feedback on my work habits from my supervisors and colleagues. I used a leadership tool called 360 Feedback that allows an individual to understand how others view his or her effectiveness as a colleague.

The professor had given me the report and said, "Don't read it until you get home and you are by yourself." Of course, I ran to my minivan, hopped into the driver's seat, tore open the manila folder, and read the summary report as fast as I could. The feedback I received gave me pause, literally. It felt as if all the air was being sucked out of the window. I found it hard to breathe. There was, of course, some great feedback, but as many of us often do, I

was focusing on the negative. What made it worse was that the negative feedback seemed accurate.

The old adage is true: You teach what you need to learn. Apparently, according to my colleagues, I had a lot to learn about slowing down and being present. I shouldn't have been surprised—actually, I don't think I was. I was just disappointed, embarrassed, and at a loss. Presence has to do with deeply listening to others, being open to the moment, thoughtfully choosing who we are and how we respond to life. Although our ingrained habits can limit our opportunities to be present, we can adopt new habits to cultivate them. I realized I needed to be open and consider the feedback that I'd received.

After I brooded for a few days, I decided to take action. Somehow, I was going to develop new habits. I was going to slow down, yet still be productive. To be honest, I wasn't sure it was possible. My life, when not on sabbatical, resembled that of a hummingbird. I functioned on about five hours of sleep. My four-year-old son hadn't slept through the night since he entered this world. I was sleep deprived, and it showed. My lists had lists, and half the time I had to ask my husband if he knew where I had left my list.

However, I was determined to make a change. My one-year sabbatical was ending, and I would be returning to the first-grade classroom in two months; I wanted to return a more relaxed, present person. In pursuit of that goal, I immersed myself in the study of presence. I began by collecting information—data. I paid closer attention to the people around me who seemed to not be frenetic. I needed to know what presence looked like before I could begin to work on being present myself. I wanted a clearer picture so I could focus on not just what to do, but what it looked like. I became a people watcher and started to observe the world around me, deliberately gathering information on aspects of life that were appealing to me. What did people who were not running around like chickens with their heads cut off look like? I watched the nuns and priests in church. I observed children engrossed in play. I paid attention to the people who seemed genuinely relaxed and happy. I started to notice who I enjoyed being with. Some common themes emerged. Those who seemed to be most present were good listeners, they didn't interrupt, and they made others feel like they were important. They didn't seem distracted, nor did they seem to be multitasking.

Next, I started to research. I listened to audio recordings in my car by leading scholars in the fields of stress reduction and mindfulness. I read countless books and articles by academic researchers, psychologists, ancient scholars, and current neurologists. I attended and