

# The Mindful Teacher

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SECOND EDITION

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# Introduction

## The Quiet Revolution

When the first edition of *The Mindful Teacher* was published in 2009, the concept of “mindfulness” was just beginning to work its way into schools. At the time, few schools had offerings for their students in contemplative practices, and even the notion of quiet or restorative time for educators and their students was anathema. A reform movement pushing higher standards, more testing, more accountability, more markets, and more technology was in full force.

How things change! By 2016 the old reform imperatives had exhausted themselves. In the United States, the passage of the Every Student Succeeds Act overturned many of the prescriptive policies of the ill-fated No Child Left Behind Act. The high-achieving educational system in Singapore had implemented a new policy of “Teach Less, Learn More” that preserved 10% of classroom time as “white space” for educators to step outside of mandated curricula and come up with their own projects based on student interests (Hargreaves & Shirley, 2012). Ontario, Canada, which also has a world-leading system, had expanded its educational goals to include student well-being as one of its top four priorities (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2014). Overall, researchers found that when students use guided meditation practices to calm their bodies and focus their minds, their learning and self-regulation improve compared with control groups (Rechtschaffen, 2014). A cottage industry of mindfulness offerings was growing in popularity in schools and society, revealing enthusiasm for a values-oriented and caring curriculum.

What does it all mean? A *quiet revolution* is beginning to spread around the world to enable schools to attain their potential to become places of learning and joy. This quiet revolution welcomes *all* students: the rich and the poor, the brilliant and the struggling, females

and males, those who are just trying to fit in and those who want to stand out. Students, parents, and educators are indicating that they want to restore the grandeur of teaching and learning as enterprises befitting the dignity of the young and the moral purpose of the adults. Keywords such as pressure, standards, markets, accountability, technology, and testing that have commanded attention as elixirs and panaceas for the past quarter century have lost their force. We are witnessing the gradual, iterative, painstaking emergence of new ideas and practices. These emphasize balance, well-being, sustainability, and integrity, and are distilled into one overarching term: *mindfulness*.

This slowly emerging cultural evolution to a deeper form of educational inquiry has been years in the making. Ellen Langer, a Harvard psychologist, made mindfulness the topic of bestselling books (1989, 1997). Spiritual guides as diverse as Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Thomas Merton, Desmond Tutu, and Thich Nhat Hanh have emphasized different kinds of mindful discernment through their teachings. These leaders combined their passion for social justice with compassion for all living beings, including those who opposed them on parts of their agendas. Their cosmopolitan humanism taught us to look beyond the particular interests of one group to the overall improvement of the human condition. However it is defined and manifested, it seems that there is an almost insatiable desire for such forms of mindful teaching and learning at this historical moment.

And why not? Scholars in the field of “subjective well-being” can produce mountains of data documenting that our fast-paced, stretched-thin lifestyles are correlated with a soaring rise in depression and a loss of locus of control (Lane, 2000; Seligman, 2002). Although the greatest determinant of our happiness has to do with the quality of our interpersonal relationships, advertising perpetually tries to persuade us that our greatest pleasures are to be found in consumption—and we all too often act as if this were true, sacrificing our relationships with friends and family in pursuit of material gratification. The recent economic crisis is only one manifestation of a larger crisis of values that has now reached virtually every corner of the globe. Small wonder that “mindfulness” is attractive to people who are looking for some deeper meaning in their lives, yet who are reluctant to give themselves over to forms of group membership that appear to mitigate against critical thinking and individualism.

As mindfulness teaching and learning slowly work their way into schools, they transform recent practices and policies. The old policy imperative to practice data-driven decision making led many educators to believe that they were drowning in the wrong kinds of data—the kind that not only shamed struggling schools, but were processed and returned to schools by testing agencies too late to have any instructional value for the individual pupils who were tested (Celio & Harvey, 2005; Ingram, Seashore Louis, & Schroeder, 2004). As a consequence of the “standards stampede” (Hargreaves, 2003, p. 176) of the past 25 years, teachers too often found themselves forced to keep up with district- and state-mandated “pacing guides” even when their students had not fully understood the material in the timeline indicated by the guides.

Educational leaders, working for years under pressure to meet No Child Left Behind’s indicators, responded by telling teachers to focus on “bubble kids” who might bump a school’s scores up above a given cut score—abandoning the traditional moral imperative of educators to teach *all* pupils (Booher-Jennings, 2005; Pedulla et al., 2003). Accountability was transformed into accountancy. Science turned into scientism. The legitimate aspiration for academic achievement was reduced to an obsession with test scores. What possibilities remained in the nooks and crannies of the profession for ethical, caring teachers to inspire their students with the sheer joy and delight that is to be found in learning?

### ALIENATED TEACHING

This second edition of *The Mindful Teacher* explores this question with new and expanded materials, using the following approach. First, we describe what we conceptualize as “alienated teaching.” From our perspective, alienated teaching has become endemic in far too many schools. In a nutshell, alienated teaching is that kind of teaching that teachers perform when they feel that they *must* comply with external conditions that they have not chosen and from which they inwardly dissent because the reforms do not serve their children well.

Alienated teaching has many different modalities that we map out in the pages that follow. In part, alienated teaching is a consequence

of policy mandates at the district, state, and federal levels. In part, it is a result of educators' own (often unconscious) capitulation to cultural norms that undermined their own moral purpose and sense of efficacy. It is difficult to tease out just how much each of these components contributed to teachers' alienation. To do so, we begin with the following questions:

- How should teachers respond to standards-based reforms and the ways that reforms continually change, requiring shifts in their teaching?
- How should teachers act when curricular packages are prescribed that they feel certain will raise achievement results, but also know that there are important forms of learning that are not measured on standardized tests?
- How should teachers cope with the rhetoric of data-driven decision making that appears to negate the prosaic but nonetheless profoundly influential interactions that pupils have with their peers on a daily basis that can enhance or undermine learning?
- How can teachers even begin to focus on instruction when their pupils bring emotional issues from unstable home situations into the classroom that cry out for gentle reassurance from the one adult with whom they seem to have some stable and regular contact on a daily basis?

These kinds of questions have not been adequately addressed in teachers' professional development for years. Policymakers' fascinations with numbers and metrics translated into professional development focused on narrow forms of assessment without accompanying instructional assistance for educators. In the process, the complexities of students' lives outside of school—in all of their richness and diversity—were ignored. Education became more insular in the process, failing to explore the intersection between schools and society that lie at the foundation of democratic education (Dewey, 1916). In addition, a great deal of research on school improvement focused on issues of alignment between pedagogy, curricula, and assessment without acknowledging that in tumultuous policy environments, few schools (if any) enjoyed such alignment.

In one study by the RAND Corporation, a majority of elementary school teachers felt that math and science standards in their

states “include more content than can be covered adequately in the school year” (Hamilton et al., 2007, p. 43). “In such a situation,” the researchers noted, “teachers must decide on their own whether to cover some standards fully and omit others or whether to cover all the standards incompletely.” In addition, significant minorities (on the order of 20–30%) of elementary teachers believed that the standards “do not cover some important content areas.” The authors continued, “These teachers faced the dilemma of teaching the content though it was not included in the standards and would not be on the assessment or omitting the content though they believed it was important (Hamilton et al., 2007, p. 43).

Individual classroom teachers did not have the power to change the overall policy environment. Given the dilemmas that they faced, no amount of data could drive them to resolve these complicated decisions in ways that involve a complex variety of trade-offs, all of which have important ethical ramifications. But much of the dominant rhetoric of pupil achievement for years suggested that they should indeed be so driven, thereby extending and exacerbating the phenomenon of alienated teaching.

## MINDFUL TEACHING

To overcome alienated teaching, we propose 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 are ordinarily 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. We draw upon diverse forms of our own work with educators to conceptualize and discuss the myriad challenges of teaching and how these can be addressed with efficacy and integrity.