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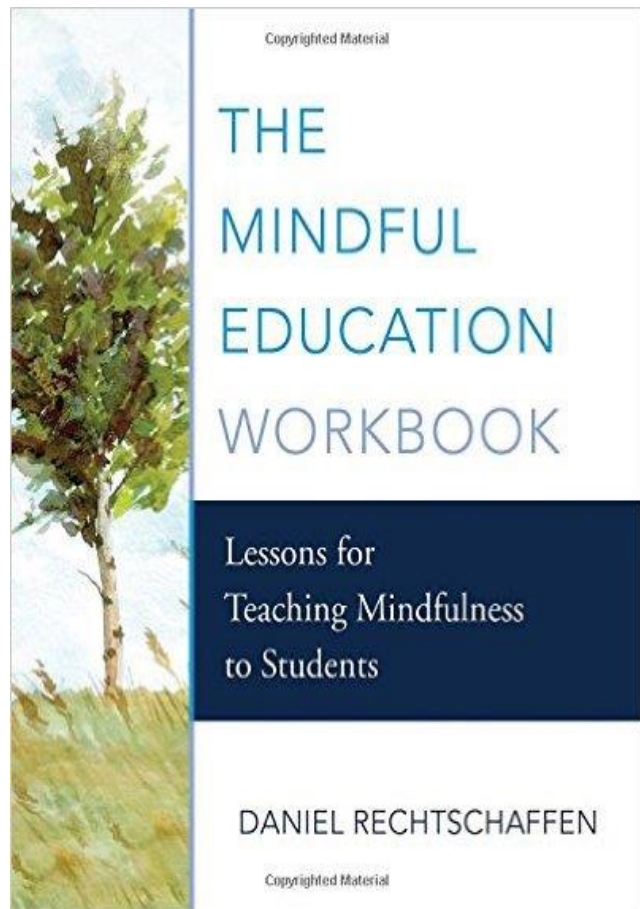
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In the past half-decade, corporate America has taken an interest in mindfulness (The Economist, 2013; Pinsker, 2015), a phenomenon that has garnered critique for diluting the meaning of meditation practices in service of capitalistic goals (Burkeman, 2015; Keohane, 2015). A similar wave has begun to reach educational settings. Poised at the front of the movement to integrate mindfulness practices within schools, *The Mindful Education Workbook: Lessons for Teaching Mindfulness to Students* provides an outstanding example of how mindfulness in schools often parallels mindfulness in corporate America, and is subject to similar critiques.

Author Daniel Rechtschaffen is the founding director of Mindful Education, a “mindfulness and social emotional learning platform for educators” which offers a \$400 online training and custom-tailored consulting for private clients via a website where he advertises “changing schools from the inside out” (danielrechtschaffen.com). *The Mindful Education Workbook* is a follow-up to his previous text, *The Way of Mindful Education*:



Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students (Rechtschaffen, 2014), which includes a forward by Jon Kabat-Zinn, who is widely credited with coining the term “mindfulness” and increasing the popularity of meditation in the West.

Rechtschaffen promises teachers mindfulness offers “a chance to raise test scores, have fewer playground fights, and cultivate a more peaceful environment” (p. 2) while benefitting teachers through the reduction of their own “burnout, compassion fatigue, and attention deficit” (p. 3). The book follows a clear organizational structure that revolves around what Rechtschaffen calls “five mindful literacies,” those that treat our “bodies, minds, hearts, relationships, [and] the world all around us” (p. 5). The lesson plans he proposes follow this order, which he indicates allows the literacies to build on each other. Even teachers with little meditation experience will find the book simple to follow and its recommendations easy to implement. The proposed activities are varied enough to suit multiple goals, and school counselors will also find numerous options for classroom lessons. Many teachers will likely appreciate the straightforward and positive tone Rechtschaffen takes as he encourages them to develop and share their own mindfulness practice with students in order to reap its many benefits.

Yet critically minded teachers might be given pause by several aspects. First, mindfulness seems heavily promoted as a tool for ease in classroom management. More than this, it could be argued mindfulness is used to control children’s bodies and minds. Rechtschaffen frequently refers to “dysregulated” children as well as “classroom chaos,” both negative evaluations of experiences (and people) even though a mindful perspective would ask practitioners to refrain from labeling. He offers multiple stories in which a student developed self-awareness through mindfulness that ultimately made the child more compliant with a teacher’s wishes. While framed as

empowerment for the student, it is worth asking if the learning that took place was not the student’s sense of self-control but rather a more subtle way for the teacher to control the student. While he does rightfully warn teachers of the risk of using mindfulness “like a drug or a behavioral modification technique” (p. 4), the types of “success stories” he recounts repeatedly emphasize the opposite.

Secondly, the cultural origin of certain practices is consistently silenced. Rechtschaffen describes meditation studies with Buddhist monks as research with “people who have been practicing mindfulness intensively for many years” (p. 9) and refers to *ujjayi* breathwork (a yogic practice that involves restricting the airflow in the back of the throat so as to produce a raspy sound) as “vacuum cleaner breaths” (p. 2). This simple and imaginative description might be easier for children to relate to, but does not offer teachers the opportunity to learn more about the history of the practice. Stripping the religious origins of practices to make them seem more “neutral” or “scientific” is a standard practice in colonial appropriation and one which is frequently seen in Western discourses regarding meditation (Zahn, 2016). This seems an intentional decision on Rechtschaffen’s part. In a section on how to introduce mindfulness practices to school communities, Rechtschaffen writes, “Remember not to use words that have religious or culturally specific language that may alienate people. Words such as *stress*, *happiness*, *attention*, *resilience*, and *well-being* are all we need” (pp. 236-237, emphasis in original). Yet he does not consider the ways failing to recognize the origins of these practices may alienate people from the very cultures that developed them. Likewise, Rechtschaffen’s assertion that “the field of mindfulness in education is young” (p. 3) is true only if one takes a colonial view of both meditation and educational practice.

A strength of the book is that it encourages teachers to develop their own practice before turning to their students. It is

important to recognize meditation techniques form a body of content educators need to understand well themselves before attempting to teach others. Further, in a time when teachers report high levels of stress (Greenberg et al., 2016), research indicates teachers benefit psychologically from their own practice of mindfulness (Abenavoli et al., 2013). Yet the way Rechtschaffen positions teachers denies them important opportunities for self-reflection in that he seems to imagine them as raceless (or tacitly white) and assumes they always act toward students' best interests. A more powerful decision – though one harder to sell – would have been to invite teachers to contemplate their own social positionality as well as involvement in an education system that often harms diverse students, especially students of color (McKenzie, 2009).

By the same token, the inclusion of a section on helping children with histories of trauma is well intentioned, and yet it applies deficit theory assumptions and stereotypes. Rechtschaffen asks teachers to consider “What are some of the particular stressors your students face because of the community they live in?” (p. 87), an instance of coded language which demeans children's home communities, thereby perpetuating deficit thinking. Specifically, the book suggests that some (low-income) neighborhoods are dangerous because of violence, whereas students in “non-dangerous” neighborhoods experience trauma due to the pressure of high standards and expectations. Likewise, the invocation of “grit” as a “mindful learning objective” (pp. 96-97), another theory whose popularity has been critiqued (Credé, Tynan, & Harms, 2016; Denby, 2016; Kohn, 2014; Ris, 2015), assures teachers of their ability to pass judgment on the range of responses students might have to various life circumstances.

Ultimately, despite the initial impression that *The Mindful Education Workbook* is an exceptionally practical volume, these shortcomings pose a practical-level problem. Rechtschaffen seems most interested in

helping students adjust to stressors, rather than enabling their resistance to stress through critique of the systems creating those stressors. Rechtschaffen seems to fall into the trap of conflating calm with peace as described by the monk Bhikkhu Bodhi, who notes that “absent a sharp social critique, Buddhist practices could easily be used to justify and stabilize the status quo, becoming a reinforcement of consumer capitalism” (quoted in Purser & Ng, 2015). Buddhist practice is meant for liberation from suffering, not adjustment to it. From a social justice perspective, mindfulness could help teachers and students cultivate patience for the length of the struggle, a strategy in the anti-bias toolkit for developing the ability to recognize one's emotional responses and stay open to difficult insights (Berila, 2016). As Ng and Purser ask,

Why shouldn't the repeated questioning of unacknowledged conditionings – the work of staying with the discomfort of repeated questioning, without expectation of any immediate solution or attachment to determinate answers – why shouldn't this be regarded as part of mindfulness training, as part of the ongoing task of developing “solutions”? Who or what is privileged or disadvantaged when this questioning is not allowed to remain open? (Ng & Purser, 2015, n.p.)

This type of practice would help teachers and students alike become aware that the stressors created by neoliberalism's effect on education, such as the constant pressure to prove oneself through frequent standardized testing, are not natural occurrences but human-created phenomena. As it stands, the appropriation of meditation serves neoliberal and capitalistic goals by encouraging an individualistic ethos, rather than self-awareness as an individual in the midst of powerful societal systems (Purser & Ng, 2015). Instead, an approach to mindfulness that helps teachers develop students' skills toward justice-oriented

citizenship (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004) would follow Audre Lorde's famous insight that self-care represents "an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 1988).

For my part, I think of a moment when one day as a substitute teacher I led second-grade students in a sequence of *metta* meditation, a contemplative practice that involves spreading compassion even to those

we find difficult to love. Afterwards the only African American girl in the class came up to me and quietly confided she had spent her time trying to forgive her regular teacher for racially charged things she had said and done. I wonder, what pages in this workbook would have helped me find a just response to offer her?

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