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MacDonald, Elizabeth, & Shirley, Dennis. (2009) *The Mindful Teacher*. NY: Teachers College Press.

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The Mindful Teacher by Elizabeth MacDonald, an elementary teacher in the Boston Public School System, and Dennis Shirley, a professor at the Lynch School of Education at Boston College and author of many educational researches, is a must read for any teacher. Together MacDonald and Shirley founded a series of seminars geared towards urban teachers in response to 'alienated teaching.' The seminar entitled, "The Mindful Teacher," is an opportunity for teachers to participate in collaboration, inquiry, formal meditation, and discussion about research. Teachers are interested in this approach are ones "looking for some deeper meaning in their lives yet who are reluctant to give themselves over to fundamentalists religious movements, cults, or other forms of group membership that appear to mitigate against

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critical thinking and individualism” (p. 1). MacDonald and Shirley believe by practicing mindfulness teachers will be happier and lead a more successful teaching career.

The driving force for the mindful teacher seminars is to address alienated teaching, a term coined from the sociological theory of “alienated labor” (p. 15). MacDonald and Shirley define alienated teaching as “instructional processes in which teachers neglect teaching practices that they believe are best suited for their pupils and instead comply with externally imposed mandates out of a sense of deference to authority” (p. 15). Even though many teachers fall into this trap, MacDonald was not one of them.

MacDonald and Shirley provide an important disconnect between researchers at the university and teachers in the school system. They feel the researchers are not asking the same questions as teachers. Therefore, they are training future teachers and administrators without true representation of what is going on in the classroom. Their decisions not only impacts individuals at the university but also lead all the way to the top of the government. In return, teachers receive mandates and such that are not conducive to their learning environment. However, they and their students are the ones directly affected. MacDonald and Shirley deemed necessary that the university and public school system form a partnership. This book is a product of several years of collaboration between the two. They received a grant to fund the seminars and started implementing their research based methods.

The first chapter is dedicated to the experiences of MacDonald starting an education career in the Boston public school system. Initially, she did not have intentions of teaching but soon found her place when she began substitute teaching in an elementary school which led to a long term substitute position in a first grade inclusion classroom. As with any classroom, there were many challenges. However, MacDonald was highly motivated and quickly used every resource she could acquire. With time MacDonald felt herself slowly slip into the type of alienated teaching they later describe. She was following district mandated curricula and constructivistic instruction. This posed a struggle because she did not feel her students

were responding to that particular type of learning environment as their skills were not improving.

Consequently, she started working closely with colleagues at Lynch School of Education at Boston College and also with teachers in her school. She did research on best practices and gave presentations to various leaders in her school system and constantly reflected among every aspect taking place at the school. Regardless, she found herself in a real predicament. How would she best meet the needs of her students while following guidelines at the school? At this point, MacDonald and Shirley began to address the root of the problem: alienated teaching. Through all of her work collaborating with other teachers and conducting professional development workshops, she was molded into a teacher leader. After 10 years of work she felt she had exhausted all avenues and was still coming up empty handed. She knew she was not the only one, but rather one of millions of teachers in the same boat.

MacDonald and Shirley received a grant that would restructure the connection between school systems and the university to make experimental partnerships. This grant linked seven colleges and universities and 18 urban schools. Before the reform could take place they needed clear goals and objectives. They started weekly discussion meetings and found the same topic arising: mindfulness. MacDonald and Shirley stated 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. (p. 26)

This seems elementary. Of course one can improve by being more conscious. Why, then, does it happen? Do teachers not have enough time in the day? Does one get stuck in a rut? For these reasons MacDonald and Shirley felt it was necessary to set up a more formal opportunity to open the door for conversation and reflection between teachers.

The basis of their information was drawn from two researched based methods of collaboration. The first option was to create a professional learning community. Further research on professional learning communities suggested the collaboration became focused on data-driven decision making which discredits the inquiry method. The next option was drawn from Ellen Langer, a Harvard psychologist. She studied mindfulness, focusing on cognition to habit. Langer's definition of mindfulness includes being open to new information and complete awareness of multiple sides of a situation. This seemed to streamline the thoughts of MacDonald and Shirley. Yet, the present research lacked one factor they deemed extremely important – formal meditation. They decided to adopt Langer's theory of mindfulness along with the mindful training of Thich Nhat Hanh. Specifically, “Hanh has elaborated 14 different mindfulness trainings that are intended to encourage detachment from one's own views, moderation in one's consumption, and compassion” (p. 25) Through mindful collaboration and formal meditation, MacDonald and Shirley wanted educators to have the opportunity to explore their differences, focus on the strengths, and bring to light new information that reflected critical inquiry and compassion.

By this time in the book, readers are hooked. MacDonald and Shirley laid the ground work for the need to chip away at alienating teaching; this was accomplished by structuring the Mindful Teacher seminars. In these seminars they would discuss readings, practice formal meditation, and explore topics. They carefully crafted eight structures that would guide the seminars, starting with pressing concerns. This format allowed teachers to express their concern of situations they were dealing with of any sort. The setting was structured to enhance free, open informal discussions. Next, they addressed a preselected topic of selective vulnerability. This allowed teacher leaders to open a question of immediate concern. A brief presentation and discussion of scholarly research followed. Extra effort was extended to promote the idea that research should be used only as information and not blanket statements. This was an important component of their structure because using and referring to research could easily lead to the data driven nature of alienated teaching. In each seminar research was followed by

formal meditation. This allowed the participants to calm and concentrate the mind. After the meditation was small group work on psychological intrusions. Teachers would break into groups of two or three and reflect upon what came about during their meditation. During this time MacDonald and Shirley realized the deeper meaning of the discussions. Topics that arose were not necessarily on the top of their head, but rather something they have been mulling around for a while without being conscious of it. This structure opened the backbone of the mindfulness they sought.

The first five stages (i.e., pressing concerns, selective vulnerability from a teacher leader, scholarly research, meditation, and small group discussion) all skimmed the top of the issues at hand. Subsequent structures allowed for the deeper critical thinking, starting with the sixth structure – the tuning fork. This is where one individual with a pressing concern would describe the issue while others remained silent. For 15 minutes, participants asked questions that were clarification only, not discussion. Then they discussed for 30 minutes. MacDonald and Shirley felt it was imperative that this structure be extremely formal in order to persuade the type of mindfulness they desired. This was followed by debriefing. Careful precautions were taken at this step not to allow the time to be a groupthink effort. The purpose was not to send the group home with one consistent idea or thought response to the issues at hand, rather identify to and summarize the big picture and solidify the individual's ideas.

Finally, the last structure was the mindfulness assignments. MacDonald and Shirley felt that mindfulness should not be limited to the educational discussions, but in all facets of the individual's life. For this, they gave the participants specific assignments, sometimes correlating with the issues of the day, to be particularly mindful about. One example of a mindful assignment was to "find ways to embed similar practices into your classroom to enable your students to understand the power and validity of their own questions and how they can drive and enrich their learning" (p. 38). These assignments were then reflected in later meetings. From these seminars ten clusters of questions arose. They were deep, meaningful essential questions that all educators strive to answer.

If readers were not sold by the solid structure of the seminars individuals would be by the extensive examples that follow. MacDonald and Shirley describe six situations with six different teachers and how they used the structures in the seminar to better themselves, their students, and their school. Olivia Jones, an elementary teacher in the Boston public system, expressed her experience and the horrific condition of her school. She made several references regarding the administration and how poor the school culture was. For example, she experienced fights on a daily basis, administrators ridiculed students, and poor relationships among teachers. In fact, the only aspect all the teachers had in common was how much they resented the administration. MacDonald and Shirley thought it would be a beneficial idea to have two administrators from the Boston Public System talk to the group. The administrators expressed the challenges they faced and shed light onto what it was like to walk in their shoes. Those discussions provided a new frame of reference towards administration for Olivia and others. The resulting open mindedness and coping skills embrace the core of being mindful.

Another teacher, Megan Mahoney, a special education teacher in the Boston public school system constantly struggled with classroom management and being able to leave those problems at school. She found the meditation phase of the seminar to be lifesaving. Once she took time to be calm and collect her thoughts, she was able to sort through what was in her head. Then, she went a step further and applied that same thinking to her classroom; the students have scheduled quiet time, and she feels those times are much more beneficial than if she was to have yet another conversation about their behavior. By redirecting the energy in the room to a more calm setting she was able to create a better learning environment for her students. These stories along with four others provided the necessary evidence that the seminars were beneficial to the classroom because it focused on the individual first, which affected every aspect of the classroom.

In chapter four, MacDonald and Shirley describe what they call the seven synergies and the three tensions of mindful teaching. The seven synergies can be thought of as the seven qualities they believe individuals must

possess in order to be a mindful teacher. Those are: open-mindedness, loving and caring, stopping, professional expertise, authentic alignment, integrative and harmonizing, and collective responsibility. One must be open to new methods of thinking and have love and care at the heart of their desires. Stopping synergy is for meditation. Much of our society is driven by hustle and bustle. The authors want people to literally stop in their tracks and regain a thoughtful direction. Having professional expertise is essential. One can be caring and open minded but if they lack the personal expertise they are without the necessary tools. Authentic alignment is for teachers to not lose sight of their own philosophies. For example, when they are asked to align their teaching with a mandated test they lose their autonomy. Next is integrative and harmonizing. Teachers must find a balance to slowly integrate new thinking into their existing without abandoning old, useful information. Collective responsibility is the authors' definition for accountability in education. The seven synergies provide descriptions for teachers to help with adjustments of mindful teaching. To accompany the seven synergies are three tensions: collective and individual, action and contemplation, ethics and power. These three tensions are a framework for reflection about one's mindfulness.

With the eight structures, seven synergies, and three tensions, MacDonald and Shirley create an opportunity for an educator to go above and beyond the call of duty to serve their selves, their students, their school, and their community. The methods are researched based and put together with the same type of mindfulness they are asking of educators. Possibly the most outstanding aspect of the framework is that it provides for any group of individuals to take on the challenges of mindful teaching. Being mindful and practicing mindfulness throughout one's career could definitely lead to a more rewarding, fulfilling life of teaching.

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