

LINDA NOBLE

6. MINDFULNESS

*A Lived Experience in Self-Awareness,
Compassion and Understanding*

ABSTRACT

In this chapter I present an autoethnography on mindful awareness and describe how mindfulness practice creates meaningful classroom interactions. Mindfulness is a commitment by teachers and students to be together, to be emotionally flexible, empathetic, and share in decision-making. In mindful classroom practice, relationships cogenerate emergent understanding. Through mindfulness, teachers and students throw out the systemic stressors of time, tests, and burnout. They abandon themselves to coexist in compassionate relationships. Being educated is being mindful. In this narrative, as the school year gets underway, my students and I come together in pools of thought. Teenagers on fire with hormones, dive in, they are excited to rekindle friendships. I gingerly dip my toe, resistant to fall, asking, “How can this be our best year?” In this chapter, I share my lived experience, my self-awareness and my perception of students’ emerging understandings in light of mindfulness practice.

Keywords: awareness, mindful, relationship, compassion, humanism

I CAN’T TAKE THIS ANYMORE!

I am slumped over, half naked. I have arrived at rock bottom, my winter exile to the ER. Clutching an empty jar of painkillers, drawn to my knees, I crave tranquility, the shot in my spine. Then, I will be calm, the pain will be numb for a while. This is “my back problem.” Or is it? This time I hear something different. “I can’t take this anymore,” my husband cries. “Why?” I ask myself. “This is not your back problem. It is my pain.” “You can’t take it!” The ER staff administer the shot. I leave with my pain suppressed, the question “Why?” unresolved.

I have spent my life in this field. Primary school in London, post-primary and undergraduate degree in British colonized Ireland, master’s degrees and doctorate in the land of my dreams. I have toiled the soil, teaching over 20 years. Most recently, by day a high-school teacher, by night a college professor. I was experiencing significant stress. I was trying to figure out a way of ameliorating disharmonies

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in my life. I rationalized that my living situation and people in my life needed to change in order for me to heal. That day, in the ER, I realized that nothing was going to change. The pain would remain as long as I denied myself. I needed to reset.

At the Middle College National Consortium Conference in New Jersey (2015), I had the privilege of engaging with Diane Ravitch during her keynote address. Reminiscent of the tennis court oath, and inspired by the setting, and Ravitch's courageous work *Reign of Error* (2013), I made a standing public proclamation to stand with her. As fate would have it, before nightfall, I had a chance encounter with a dear friend, Malgorzata Powietrzynska, a very knowledgeable and experienced researcher. Malgorzata shared her experience researching mindfulness as part of the work conducted by Ken Tobin's team at the Graduate Center in New York. The joy and serendipity in our friendship, rekindled after 15 years, was exhilarating. Little did I realize that I had opened up a new chapter of my life. This is it. My path through mindfulness to self-awareness, compassion and understanding.

The day after the conference ended my plane touched down on vacation to my family in Ireland. My sister, Mandy, drove me from the airport on her way to a weeklong session on mindfulness practice for teachers, hosted by the Limerick Education Center. A universal plan was unfolding. It seemed that all I needed was to be present, accept and not judge. Without much thought or reservation, I joined Mandy. The plot was thickening. In a small, mildewed classroom, with fifteen Irish women, I laughed and cried about the joys and sorrows of teaching. Soothed by the veil of Irish mist caressing the fair land, as she has over the centuries, we gently rubbed each other's backs, inside the old schoolhouse. We sang songs, and lay on yoga mats with our toes wiggling in the air like mischievous, schoolgirls. On days we ate mindfully, I was reminded of attending convent school over 40 years earlier. But, this time there was no fear. There was no judgement. We were taking risks and falling down energized by liberating the folly of our egos. Attending to the whispers of our breath, we were celebrating life. As in all revolution; Enlightenment, Scientific, Glorious or otherwise; we conspired and shared our dreams. Could we bear "mindfulness" as a gift to benefit our students, our children. My life or life's purpose had not changed. My family and friends had not changed. But, something was very different. I could feel it in my spine!

The summer trip to Ireland illustrates the emergent nature of social life – my coming across mindfulness and making a decision to embrace it. When I returned to New York, I could not keep mindfulness in my life but delete it from my life's work. In the fall, I began to explore mindfulness practice in my classroom. The public high school students I teach are mainly from the Caribbean Islands, Jamaica, Haiti and the Dominican Republic. The school population is approximately 600 students; including, 72% Black, 9% Hispanic, 8% Asian and 5% White; with 73% free lunch and 6% Special Education students. Compared to the 69% citywide average, 99% of the students graduate within four years. I had taught social studies there for almost 10 years.

TEACHER AS RESEARCHER

Powietrzynska (this volume) in applying sociocultural lenses suggests research is meant to widen, sharpen, and nuance our understandings of the lifeworlds of ourselves and those we study. Lenses legitimize diverse ways of knowing, and acknowledge pathways to knowledge. Throughout this experience, I remained in the role of learner, learning what was going on in our classroom relationships. In addition to observing, I had numerous conversations with my students, taking careful notes to describe and understand how they interpreted what was happening. I asked questions to discover perceptions and interpretations that I could not directly observe. In such informal conversations, as Sharan Merriam (1998) notes, it was important to remain open to new ideas. I found that to be both mindful, and to learn a new way of viewing the world, I needed to be highly tolerant of ambiguity, uncertainty and uniqueness (difference).

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES: MINDFUL AWARENESS

In the technicist nature of objectives and performance, as outlined by Jim Gleeson (2010), my role had been limited to report on my students' performance through competitive assessments, structuring lessons around text, with formal authority based relationships. In contrast, *Mindfulness* has helped me to reconnect with myself; coming to know, and to care holistically for the students in my classroom. Being liberated from judgement of my students, and myself I am emotionally reset and energized with an open mindset. As a veteran teacher having over 20 years of experience, I have always attended to and cared for my students. Yet, now attention in my teaching practice is mindful and self-aware, empathetic and compassionate. I have come to appreciate that mindfulness is not just about paying more attention; but as Mark Williams and his colleagues (2007) point out, it's about the kind of attention we pay.

As James Greeno (1998) notes, in the past, attention has been focused on expert performance from the perspective of modeling the mental processes of an expert in a problem situation. However, a theoretical perspective of expertise has been recently emerging that considers ways in which the cognitive structures of a working group and the individual participants co-evolve in sharing knowledge. Kenneth Tobin (2015) points out that knowing, as cultural enactment, is experienced by social actors as schemas and practices, which are dialectically related. The heightened awareness of aspects of conduct creates possibilities for intentionally making changes for the purpose of improving the quality of social, political, and economic life. Mutual coexistence. As a teacher in an early college high school, it is difficult for me to separate moral and economic questions. Tolerance and acceptance of cultural diversity, traits of personal development are not detached from employability. Career and college readiness requires that we behave morally, are tolerant, and respect others.

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In mindful classroom practice, we take risks with each other and become vulnerable. For example, in our daily breathing meditation practice guided by Diana Winston (2016) of UCLA Mindful Awareness Research Center, my students and I sit down together and close our eyes, attending to ourselves and focusing on our individual breath. During an early sitting, my thoughts drifted to a visualization. I became an ancient Egyptian sphinx; large, whole and calm, seated with the students in our classroom. When I returned my attention to my breath, I felt a profound sense of warmth, appreciation, and connection as mediated by my heightened sense of awareness. Nicole Albrecht (2014) maintains that these elements are commonly associated with wellness characteristics that combine to form wellbeing. Shauna Shapiro and Linda Carlson (2009) note that enhanced wellbeing moves along a continuum from concerns about self to an expanded worldview of how individual decisions can benefit others. My greater self-awareness and connection makes me empathetic to my students, transforming our relationships.

Sue Smith (2010, 2013) includes in her research students' valued comments that reveal transformation as they cultivate mindfulness and meditation. Smith's findings are similar to my student reflections about the importance of our mindful classroom practice. "*Mindfulness*" to my students has been ... "a moment of peace to relax, remembering and appreciating myself and those who care for me, a time to get my head together, the three minutes in this day when I can finally hear myself think ..."

Agwe states, "I will admit that at first I did not think that mindfulness was helpful. Now, I am thankful to be doing mindfulness in my school routine."

Damerae adds, "Mindfulness has become part of the class for me. Sometimes, when we skip it, it feels weird and empty without it."

"For me," writes Kai, "mindfulness has meant taking time from constantly doing things and being busy to relax and restart myself so that I am not overwhelmed and I can reflect on what has happened so far."

Oria shared with me, "I use my time during mindfulness to think about the irony of the education system. The fact that a grade can determine my fate. I ponder the fact that we are all measured by the same means. We're ranked, passed or failed. I often think of ways to better teach students as well."

Raeni writes, "Mindfulness for me has been a journey of sorts. I have had many peaceful experiences through mindfulness. I will continue to use it whenever I need a personal break from life."

This latter comment in particular speaks to the idea of education transcending the classroom space. It illustrates how mindful change that is personally negotiated, is owned.

As curriculum involves selection from among the culture there is a need to broaden the social-base of decision-making, including student voice. Mindfulness

is something that should be considered as school “content” as opposed to “fluff.” It’s a tool that people can use to catalyze improvements in wellbeing. Kenneth Tobin and friends (2014) advocate for science education to reflect sustainability of the living and the nonliving universe and wellness of beings. In this sense, being aware and engaging compassionately in mindful interactions, we are learning to coexist. This year, we shared this experience on my birthday, when my social studies students presented me with a collective card, noting,

Shona: Thank you so much for the work you do for making me feel safe in your classroom.

Steebeth: May you live to see many more years, and if not, know that your legacy of questioning lives on.

Ayida: Enjoy your birthday and live life to the fullest, you are one of the best teachers I ever had.

MINDFULNESS PRACTICE IN OUR CLASSROOM

At first, I was conservative. I did not want to take ownership of mindful practice. I was concentrated on doing my job and getting my students to pass our New York State Regents exam. As noted by Gleeson (2010), often curriculum partners control the secret garden of the curriculum, protecting their own sectoral interests and legitimizing official thinking regarding practices to maintain the status quo. My experience was in a room 25 feet by 35 feet with 18 desks to seat 34 students. The question was, how much did I want to get away from that by engaging in mindful practice? John Seely Brown and his colleagues (1989) point out learning is the process of entering a cultural meaning system. Arthur Wilson (1993) maintains that to learn, one must become embedded in the culture in which knowing and learning have meaning. Ultimately, entering into meaning systems shared by others requires entering into relationships with others. To engage with each other in mindful interactions took courage. We had to take risks in suspending judgement in order to learn to trust each other. If a student was late, cheating on an exam, or missing work it became the student’s responsibility and my openness to learn that brought about understanding. In order to scaffold our learning, we built bridges across bias and blame. Our courageous acts of non-judgement created a safe space in which we could be ourselves and be together in a mindful culture.

A community’s activities are framed by its culture. Hilary McLellan (1996) notes that meaning and purpose are socially constructed. Lev Vygotsky (1978) and Jean Lave (1988) stress the social roots of cognition. Vygotsky introduced the term “the zone of proximal development” in 1962, and, in her theory of “everyday activity,” Lave (1988) expands upon Vygotsky’s work, arguing that “cognition observed in everyday practice is distributed among mind, body, activity, and culturally organized setting” (p. 1). Learning is situated in interactions between and

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among peripheral participants and full participants in a community of meaning. We created a mindful, compassionate framework for facing challenges and coexisting through empathy, sharing perspectives, and joint decision-making. Students would jokingly assign me homework, to share the joy in connections they were making to the material we discussed in class, for example, to watch a movie or read a book. Frequently, students stood opposite me in the classroom coteaching content, forming peer groups and selecting primary sources to co-annotate, using rubrics they created. Overtime, acceptance and non-judgement replaced fear, being emotionally flexible we tuned in to our needs for positive classroom interactions.

MINDFUL IMPACT: STUDENT VOICES

Self-Awareness

In a mindful self-reflection on “*Being*,” a student voiced her emerging self-awareness. Her poem, depicts universal beauty, and illustrates a transformative response to conflicts of gender and race.

Beauty

Beauty is a gift everyone deserves
People see it from our faces to our curves
Beauty is universal
Beauty has no need for a rehearsal
We are unique
Woman and man
I don't deserve your critique
I am not less than
I am beautiful
Our beauty on the inside is
Who we are as an individual
So I'll just let your negativity slide
I am beautiful, wonderful and just me
It all matters on who you decide to be
– Lesia

This poem was not part of a formative or summative assessment. I spoke with Lesia and learned that her philosophy of life was created and shared with me as a result of her self-awareness and our relationship built through mindful practice. We later honored and celebrated the text in class with the author's reading and posting on the bulletin board. The student created the task and the text, there was no assigned rubric. Student performance and personal growth exceeded expectations. My mindful role as Lesia's teacher situated our mutual awareness, and our learning about values of race and gender in the authentic, cogenerated, culture of our classroom.

Compassion

Several student-created texts showed evidence of how our vulnerability and empathy were turning to compassion as we began to embrace mindfulness. In reflection on the concept of “*relationship*,” Shona was compelled to share her mindful connection to others in empathy toward a migrant woman’s experience of sexual abuse.

My Crazy Syrian Mind

My Crazy Syrian Mind
 It is justified for me
 to sell my body, while
 my pledge that is
 most sacred to a women
 has been taken away from me
 I’m wondering here wondering
 for days without
 nothing, but the clothes on my back.
 To you, you see me
 clothed but I’m not,
 I’m walking around all
 naked and exposed.
 For not
 only does my husband know my beauty,
 but others do.
 For it is turned
 into a true dark ugliness,
 a black veil, now
 throning my halo.
 I’m now missing parts
 of me for though I
 feel empty, I felt
 with all of me which
 quickly disappeared into
 flames, just like my
 country and home.
 Look what you done
 to me. You left
 me here begging
 Where is Allah?
 Where is Mohammed.
 I’m being craved for.
 I’m just here

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in a lions den
being preyed upon.
All of me is gone.
I have none of me left.

I came for a better life
but it turns out I should
have stayed and be murdered.
for I am a dead women
walking, a rotten, filthy
woman trying to fight for her life.

YOU must not mutter a word!
Those men said:
Keep Quiet! Women!
So they say,
Keep Quiet Now!
That all the whispers
I hear all the time
that follow me around.
For if I mutter
a word I may be
killed, for that
they rob my pledge
away. Even my husband abuses it.

I go to the psychiatrist,
questioning me,
saying I have
a mental sickness
to them I seem crazy.
Everyone on the camp knows.
They keep their children
away from me,
for they too
believe I'm crazy.
They think I caused
all of it, for they believed
I went against Allah,
and my husband,
so now I'm being punished.

Am I a crazy Syrian?
Can Anyone Answer me
For only I could

testify what's in my "crazy"
 Syrian Mind.
 For my mind is
 now like an abandoned
 asylum that no one wants to hatch back.

The 14 year-old student's compassionate narrative honors the woman's emotion of shame and humanizes the experience. To humanize is to make more civilized and understandable. Our classroom was being infused with student created text that reflected our emerging sense of ethnic conflict, gender bias, and human values. In the context of top-down control, punitive teacher evaluation, assessment driven curriculum, and scripted instruction, our teacher talk and student texts connected us to voices beyond the walls and was liberating.

Celebrating Difference

An interdenominational student group, including Christians and Muslims, articulated their understanding of global concerns. In *Islam Through the Lens*, the group co-authored a response to a Carmelite missionary, report on customs of the Safavids and the rule of Shah' Abbas in 1604.

Islam Through the Lens

They say we are not the same
 because we believe in a god named Allah
 Because I believe In Muhammad
 Because I wear the hijab to cover my head,
 the way I dress
 where being conservative and simple
 is what makes a woman sexy,
 which is my sense
 of identity, but it does not work
 They judge me because I want to read the Quran,
 the way I pray to my god,
 the way I celebrate which is apart from this world
 I want to say I'm done but I'm not
 But then again, I may have no choice

We are oppressed, and no one hears our cries
 I thought we were done; I hate this part right here
 The part where we are discriminated
 No matter what we are
 I am a Muslim

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Remember when everyone said "Je Suis Charlie"
I Am Charlie! Justice for Charlie!"
No justice for Islam?
They continuously discriminate us,
Our religion is a failure to them
If you asked for world peace, they'd rather kill
But who are you? Who are we?

I thought it would stop but no, they tell us to go
To return to a dark abyss because we are monsters to the world
Who are we to judge?
You see the skin that you're in? It makes us no different
Just a color that we all see when we look at each other

Remember in 9/11
And the corruption happened,
They blamed every Muslim
Telling us, "It was you who did this,
Go back to your country"
Which makes us now branded
to being a terrorist
But what can I say
I am Muslim

You would think
it stopped even amongst our culture
But it didn't.
They use our religion
to justify cruelty
to humanity, they
are disgraces to
our religion, to our
culture, for they
go against Allah and Mohammed
teachings, the actions they take
is like slapping Mohammed
in the face.

You create enemies
division and confusion like the Serpent
did to Adam and Eve.
For goodness sake
can't you see your destroying our religion?

For we pray for everybody even our enemies,
 not kill a man like he's a chicken for supper.
 Can't you see your anger
 is not from Allah, but
 from the anger
 your ancestors
 passed on from generation
 to generation as a form
 of distraction to prevent
 you from the real purpose of Islam?
 Can't you all see?
 Can't you all see
 through the lens
 of a Muslim Now?

The students stood, arguing about religious bias. They debated and labored semantics. Their words mattered. Through their text, a version of history was uniting them beyond the classroom. In this mindfulness practice, I have a deeper appreciation for our relationships, and trust in our interactions. My self-awareness liberates me from attachment to an "expert ego." In paying non-judgmental attention, and being open to each other, we are creating understanding.

THE END: TOWARD A NEW BEGINNING OF HUMANISM AND
 DEMOCRACY IN URBAN EDUCATION

In education, goals are treated independently ignoring the overlap between equity and equality; social and personal development. Education for democracy, schooling for psychosocial as well as intellectual development is devalued. Within the current environment there is a division of labor between the curriculum expert and teachers as curriculum implementers. As William Pinar and friends (2004) note, when teachers are reduced to technicians managing student productivity, a school is no longer a school but a business. Richard Ingersoll and Thomas Smith (2004) report that up to one half of teachers leave the profession within their first five years of teaching. Tobin (2015) and friends have researched instances of angry outbursts that indicate intense emotions might be damaging to the health of teachers and students. Tobin's ongoing research revealed that teachers and students might protect their wellbeing if they had strategies for ameliorating intense emotions. Most urban classrooms studied were highly toxic for teachers, who expressed intense emotions in terms of heightened blood pressure, high pulse rate, and low percentages of oxygen in the blood. As a direct result of my work with teachers and graduate students, I grew gravely concerned about their high level of stress teaching in schools. The teachers' stress was compounded by the stress their students felt in

large part due to social and economic injustice. For students of hunger, students of pain, student victims, there is no justice, no peace. No safe place.

This past summer, I found a personal path back to health and peace through mindfulness. This fall, I decided to bring mindfulness into my teaching practice. The student voice shared in this chapter is a direct result of the safe place we created by paying attention to our breath. The public school system is experiencing a fiscal crisis. Teachers and students face a high stakes punitive environment. The neglect of teacher research in informing curriculum design, implementation, and assessment; has silenced debate. The strain of mercantilist philosophy has weakened intellectual and cultural life. Students leave education lacking a valued philosophy of life or an appreciation of global perspective. Educational narratives and qualitative studies that explore the person-centered nature of education and focus on values can transcend the utilitarian concept of the economic agenda that dominates educational policy and practice. In the Irish context, Garret Fitzgerald (2007) called on principals and teachers through their privileged access to lay the ethical foundations of new civic republicanism, or, find an ethical wasteland, a society without values corroded by materialism. Neuroscientists, Richard Davidson and friends (MLERN, 2012), and researchers, Powietrzynska et al. (2015), noting scientific evidence that supports the benefits associated with mindfulness practices, advocate for the legitimate inclusion of this knowledge base in schools. As a post-primary school teacher certified by the Irish Teaching Council; a New York City public high school teacher, and college educator, this autoethnography is part of a grassroots-like movement, a call to reset the system from within. Can we suspend judgement; engage awareness, compassion, and understanding, in order to breathe humanism into our lived experience in education? From the perspective of authentic inquiry and ethical obligation, we must encourage interpretive research on mindfulness toward improvement in the quality of life for teachers and students in urban education. Authentic practitioner research is needed to counter think tank access to decision-makers. Marketization of educational research that impacts fiscal policy in education is becoming more invisible. Gleeson (2010) and Tobin (2015) note that professionalism in teaching requires a shift by teachers to participate in promoting “the common good.” Mindfulness, as an emancipatory and transformative heuristic, requires further research and debate.

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