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Holmes, Kimberley

University of Calgary

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# **LEARNING TO BREATHE, BREATHING TO LEARN: THE ROLE OF MINDFULNESS IN CURRICULUM AND LEARNING**

Kimberley Holmes

*University of Calgary, Werklund School of Education*

*Teachers are not technicians but self-reflective individuals who work in a holistic manner to connect curriculum to cognitive, emotional and social contexts. Living up to this holistic vision requires teachers to “take seriously the idea that a child’s personal signature, his or her distinctive way of learning and creating, is something to be preserved and developed” (Eisner, 2002, p. 581). Inspiring Education (Alberta Learning, 2010) states that the goal of education is to create engaged, ethical and entrepreneurial citizens who have been “enabled to do well in life” (Eisner, 2002, p. 581). Actualizing this vision requires mindfulness with regards to curriculum and learning.*

The purpose of this paper is to explore the role mindfulness plays in curriculum and learning. The topic is explored through my own lived experience as a teacher and researcher, as well as Wilber’s Integral Model (2000, 2008). Currently teachers are feeling increasingly fragmented and disengaged as a result of the intensifying demands they face with regards to students, learning styles and system expectations (Smith, 1999; Jardine, Clifford & Friesen, 2006; Jardine, 2012; McKinnon, 2009; Smith, 1999). Mindfulness, and reflection on our personal experience, is needed to bring us to a place of wisdom in our current educational contexts. Storytelling is a traditional method of transmitting wisdom and

knowledge and “narratives of personal experience are always connected to social, political, cultural and historical dynamics of identity, values and transformative possibilities” (Chambers, Hasbe-Ludt, Leggo & Sinner, 2012, xxvii). This paper examines how teacher narratives may be utilized in professional development with regards to curriculum and learning.

As a young girl I refused to color in the lines. I often felt dismayed when forced to learn in the same way and fashion as all the other children. This factory model of education, with its emphasis on standardization, “provided an accessible, uniform model of education that met the needs of the masses at that time” (Friesen & Jardine, 2009, p. 4). I was expected to take my proper place amongst the crowd, doing what I was told to do. As a result, school became like a suffocating crate I vowed to break out of. When I was no longer the student but the teacher, I continued my silent war against a system demanding compliance and following the doctrine of efficiency where “students and teachers are not required to be thoughtfully engaged in teaching and learning” (Friesen & Jardine, 2009). While others struggled with grammar checklists and spelling lists my students and I conversed and shared our hopes and dreams, which led us into a deeper understanding of the literature and of our interconnected role with the text and our world. My students were engaged in the classroom, understanding their own stories based on their own reflections and considerations, demonstrating the “idea that a child’s personal signature, his or her distinctive way of learning and creating, is something to be preserved and developed” (Eisner, 2002, p. 581). In a deeply ethical way, they understood themselves, their connection to others, and their interconnected roles as beings on earth. My own children’s arrival into the school system demanded that I pay even more attention to the role of mindfulness. My happy, bright boys rapidly morphed into frustrated and angry children as their school systems buried them in worksheets and rote memorization. Their individual gifts and talents were largely ignored as the system strove to standardize their skills and personalities. In response, they fought back to find their own free space—but “free spaces are rare and hard won, and learning to live well within them is hard

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work that requires stillness, generosity and perseverance” (Jardine, 2012, p.8). There was no room for their free space, no room for reflection or mindfulness, and this absence of contemplative room took a mental and physical toil. Upon seeing their frustration I could no longer ignore the call to explore mindfulness in our professional practice. I needed to understand the grand narrative of education in order to find a way to re-author the storyline into a vision that aligned with the current educational context and needs of the system. I was drawn to this concept of mindfulness, its role in education as illustrated by teacher’s stories, and the implication this had for curriculum and learning.

## **MINDFULNESS**

Mindfulness is a vast topic and establishing a definition is a difficult task. For the purpose of this paper mindfulness will be considered with regards to the following definitions.

Smith (1999) considers the Sanskrit word *upaya* with regards to teaching praxis:

In Sanskrit, there is a word *upaya*, used precisely to describe the teaching style of an Awakened One. Literally it refers to “skill in means, or method.” It also has the connotation of “appropriateness”, of knowing exactly what is required in any specific instance. Students under the tutelage of one who is awake often find the teacher to be a bundle of contradictions, because what is said to one may be completely reversed in instructions to another. This is because the teacher understands the unique needs and capacities of each, honoring their differences, and knowing what is best for each. (p. 20)

MacDonald and Shirley (2009) reflect on the concept of mindful teaching as

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 the aspects of their classroom instruction and pupils’ learning. (p. 4)

*Inspiring Education* (Alberta Learning, 2010) cites as the goal of effective education the creation of an environment wherein each learner requires what they need when it is required, with “each learner starting and ending on different points” (Alberta Education, 2010, p. 26). It is the “awakened teacher” (Smith, 1999) that is “informed by contemplative practices and teacher inquiry” (MacDonald & Shirley 2009, p. 4) that is needed to reach the goal of *Inspiring Education* (Alberta Learning, 2010). Mindful teachers are required to meet the current needs of our system.

#### MINDFULNESS AND THE INTEGRAL MODEL

This theoretical framework is based on Wilber’s Integral Model (Esborn-Hargens, 2006, 2009; Martin, 2008; Wilber, 2000). This model allows for the correlation of the data in attempts to find common themes and ideologies. Research has been done in independent areas around the topic of mindfulness in education, but there has not been mindfulness research correlating the interconnected perspectives of the four quadrants of Wilber’s Integral Model. The framework is suited to the current exploration because of its comprehensive nature: in that it serves as a model for seeing from different perspectives, the framework aligns with our original definition of mindfulness as being open to what is needed and required depending on each specific contextual situation. There are several contrasting perspectives within the Integral framework and Wilber believed that this radically different framework offers a mode to study human experiences in a post-modern research context.

The concept of mindfulness is explored through the four quadrants on the Integral model and summarized below in Figure 1.

<p>Interior Individual Upper left – Mindfulness and Self (I)</p> <p>Self- Realization or "Awakening" as part of the process to becoming a mindful instructional leader.</p> <p>“How do teachers personally define mindfulness?”</p>	<p>Exterior Individual Upper right – Mindfulness &amp; Science (It)</p> <p>Current brain research and cognitive neuroscience with regards to mindfulness and the impact upon neuroplasticity?</p> <p>“How do teachers incorporate mindfulness into their curriculum design?”</p>
<p>Interior Collective Lower Left – Mindfulness and Storytelling (We)</p> <p>The sharing of our personal and collective stories and the building of a learning community in a mindful way.</p> <p>“Can storytelling be used to build a common vision in a learning community?”</p>	<p>Exterior Collective Lower Right – Mindfulness &amp; Systems (Its)</p> <p>Working within the frameworks of current policy and system direction in the province of Alberta with regards to the definition of mindfulness.</p> <p>“How is mindfulness related to the current policy mandates in education for teachers in Alberta?”</p>

Figure 1: Integral Mindfulness for Curriculum and Learning (Wilber, 2000/2006)

### **INTEGRAL NARRATIVE INQUIRY AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY**

Mindfulness and the role that it plays in curriculum and learning will be examined and explored through four interconnected areas based on Wilber’s Integral model framework (2000/2006). Mindfulness will be considered through the exploration of self, cognitive learning science, storytelling, and current system policy in the province of Alberta. Through the use of narrative inquiry, specific strategies as to how mindfulness can be accessed in the teaching practice and how it can be utilized in a classroom context will be explored. As Leggo (2012) reflects, “Life is abundant, and narrative inquiry is a way of focusing on some particulars of that abundance in order to recognize some of the possibilities of meaning that lie always in the seemingly tangled messiness of lived experience” (p. xiii). An understanding of the role of mindfulness in curriculum and learning seeks, through the personal stories of instructional leaders, the particulars of their interconnected lived experiences in an effort to establish “ a renewed connection between humans, the places, and the beings that dwell in these places” (Hasbe-Ludt, Leggo & Chambers, 2009, p.14). It is hoped that through these

interconnected stories others shall be able to learn about the role of mindfulness in curriculum and learning in a way that is meaningful and relevant as “a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). This process will have teachers as researchers exploring their own lived experience of mindfulness and reflecting on how it becomes a part of their classroom context. The data gathered will then be correlated to current brain research and system direction in the province of Alberta.

### **TEACHERS AS RESERACHERS**

Different forms of storytelling challenge us to see the world from varying perspectives, making storytelling a useful counterpart to the comprehensive framework of the Integral Model in that the model’s four quadrants are split between differing points of experience. Pinar (1976) challenges educational researchers “to look inside ourselves as well as outside, and begin to describe, as honestly and personally as we can, what our internal experience is” (p.3). Instructional leaders in the field know this work best and understand the complexities that are presented when personalizing student learning. Reflecting on this complex process requires teachers to have a type of stillness and openness to the research process, which involves “the capacity of beginning to ‘see’ life for what it truly is, without the embellishment of culture or tradition” (Smith, 2012, p. xiv). The process will also involve a type of restoring of the grand narrative of education, marking a return to some of the traditional practices of the past while simultaneously moving toward the future. This is a complex journey to undertake, and “through our writing and our willingness to share our writing with others, we perform our commitment to living with critical intent, critical interrogation, and thoughtful awareness” (Chambers, Hasbe-Ludt, Leggo & Sinner, 2012, p. xxvii). This thoughtful awareness, critical interrogation and intent will be required in curriculum and learning to support the vision of Inspiring Education.

## **MINDFULNESS, CURRICULUM AND LEARNING**

Learning is a complex process and the demands of today are steadily increasing. But as educators we need to slow down, to be present and to pay attention to what truly is required in order to create “engaged, ethical and entrepreneurial citizens” (*Inspiring Education*, Alberta Learning, 2010). My memory as a dismayed young girl refusing to colour in the lines drives my desire to see a new model of teaching and learning, one that focuses on the individuals and their passions and desires. The new model will be mindful of the student and the context at hand, allowing for personalization in student learning, since “students are not uniform, they are not steel, and they do not respond in the same way to pressures of various kinds” (Eisner, 2002, p. 583). Each unique brain will discover its own gifts and passions and will understand its own particular journey. Students will recognize their roles in our interconnected system as individuals “who have particular interests, pursue those interests in depth, and at the same time work on public service projects that contribute to something larger than their individual interests” (Eisner, 2002, p. 583).

The model proposed in this paper will not follow traditional paradigms or assembly-line principles but will be based in the reflective praxis of mindful instructional leaders willing to share their stories of teaching and to reflect upon those stories’ ability to impact curriculum and learning. This is highly significant work, since “the point of learning anything in school is not primarily to enable one to do well in school—although most parents and students believe this to be the case—it is to enable one to do well in life” (Eisner, 2002, p. 581). Through the personal narratives of mindful instructional leaders we can begin to understand how to engage students in the work of life and to provide an ethical framework within which to live. Mindfulness is about creating a better life and “learning to see ourselves and the world in new ways, learning to work in new ways with our bodies and our thoughts and feelings and perceptions, and learning to laugh at little things more, including ourselves, as we practice finding and maintain our balance as best we can” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. iv). Reflecting on the role of mindfulness

in curriculum and learning requires teachers to participate in contemplation and stillness towards rethinking the complex process of education. One means of inciting this reflection is taking the time to share the stories of our experiences as “we learn together what might be” (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo & Sinner, 2012, p. xxvii).

The process of slowing down and taking the time to learn to breathe will allow us to breathe to learn, for “our breathing will be in harmony with our steps, and our mind will be naturally at ease” (Thich Nhat Hanh, 2009, p. 12). When our brains are at ease we obtain a state of mindfulness that current research shows improves learning and brain development (Damasio, 2010; Davidson, et, al, 2012; Doidge N., 2007; Immordino Yang & Damasio, 2007; Siegel, 2010; Sousa, 2010; Ramachandran, 2011). If instructional leaders take the time to reflect on mindfulness, they will effect a process that slows down the fragmented frantic pace of daily life in schools. As a result, we can discover the possibilities available when “we take the time to embark collectively on a new long journey inward, not for the purpose of simply celebrating our personal or collective subjectivities, but for the more noble one of laying down the outward things that presently enslave us” (Smith, 1999, p. 5). When we break free of the enslavement of the factory model of education perhaps we shall then open a portal to a place where there is freedom to color outside of the lines, a place where “spaces are opened up where things can happen to us, and our lives can be shaped with some graciousness and mindfulness” (Jardine, 2012, p.11). In this space of mindfulness, “our narratives, poems and meditations are echoes whose vibrations are like lines of connection that guide our practice” (Hasbe-Ludt, Chambers, & Leggo, 2009, p. 5).

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