

Reconstructing "Education" through Mindful Attention. Positioning the Mind at the Center of Curriculum and Pedagogy, by Oren Ergas

William F. Pinar

BOOK REVIEW

Reconstructing "Education" through Mindful Attention. Positioning the Mind at the Center of Curriculum and Pedagogy, by Oren Ergas, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Mindfulness – or “mindful attention” – is, Oren Ergas (2017, 14) tells us, “no less than a discourse at this point,” running the “gamut from scientific research to wisdom traditions, and to popular culture.” What the term portends should schools take it seriously is what this accessible and systematic overview makes clear. “The task of ‘education’,” Ergas (2017, 316) explains, “is to shape a mind that is willing to challenge its own ways of seeing and being, based on taking responsibility for working with his own attentive powers.” Self-aware, self-critical, self-motivating but not solipsistic: such “mind” will “care” for “society” too (2017, 316). This is a panoramic – some will worry totalizing - vision for schools and the education they encourage.

Certainly Ergas is convinced of the appropriateness of mindfulness in the reconstruction of education. On occasion there is an urgency to his tone, perhaps a feeling following news reports that, in this era of social media, mindfulness – in terms of attentiveness and memory – is imperilled. In 2015 for instance, Microsoft released the results of research conducted by researchers in Canada on the effect of digital devices on the brain. The average human attention span was found to have fallen to 8 seconds,

even less than a goldfish enjoys (Sacks 2015, C8; see Spring 2012 for a summary of technology and education).

Is mindfulness the answer? While Ergas and many others have no doubt, there are sceptics of course. Ruth Whippman (2016, SR9) speaks for these when she characterizes mindfulness as a “neoliberalism” of the “emotions,” wherein our moods are detached from circumstances and appended primarily to our own efforts. Those efforts may prove futile, she adds, citing a study by the U.S. Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality, a meta-analysis of over 18,000 separate studies on meditation and mindfulness techniques. Although several studies the Agency reviewed showed that mindfulness exercises brought “small benefits” when compared to “doing nothing,” in general they did not improve upon results obtained by “general relaxation techniques” like “exercise” or “muscle relaxation” (Whippman 2016, SR9).

Whether mindfulness techniques – there are several exercises in the Ergas book – work or not (or how and when and for whom) is interesting but not necessarily definitive in deciding whether or not to employ them. As with traditions of meditation – like Zen - mindfulness may be intrinsically important as a form of spiritual practice. In the Ergas’s argument, however, mindfulness seems closer to being another psychology of education. For over a century now academic psychologists have insisted that their discipline – excluding psychoanalysis (Taubman 2011) – has the answers to the questions posed by instruction and assessment. Devalued as only a means to full employment or now (under Trump) as an opportunity for entrepreneurs and corporations to profit, curriculum is clearly also in psychology’s sights (see Williamson

2013). I have always been impressed by psychology's success at colonization: not content with its own inflated importance within many university organizational structures, some claim the discipline is relevant almost regardless the topic.

The canonical curriculum question – what knowledge is of most worth? – is an ongoing and situated question. Yes it is psychological, but it is also political, racial, gendered, institutional ... even economic. How much of the school curriculum mindfulness should occupy? I can see its inclusion in secondary-school psychology (or social studies) courses, but positioning it as the “center” of curriculum and pedagogy overall – as Ergas suggests in his subtitle – seems like mistaking a prerequisite for the main course.

Despite chapters devoted to the “inner curriculum” (chapter 6), to the “curriculum of embodied perception” (chapter 7,) to the curriculum of “me” (chapter 8) and (even) “I” (chapter 9), there is remarkably little subjectivity in the book. It is information and argument, designed to persuade. There is almost no autobiography (on p. 298, n. 1 there is a snippet) or auto-ethnography or what in Canada is called “life-writing” (Chambers et al. 2012). Despite their prominence as chapter titles, “I” and “me” have been expelled in what seems tantamount to another technology of attention (Crary 1999).

At least since the establishment of compulsory schooling teachers have beseeched their students to “pay attention,” a prerequisite for learning that psychologists have theorized variously, most recently neurologically and even

pharmaceutically. Mindfulness has the advantage of being associated with ancient forms of meditation, themselves sometimes associated with curriculum (Kumar 2013).

Mindfulness is a hot topic. Amazon.com listed over 112,000 results when I searched the term. It turns out that Americans spend an estimated \$4 billion each year on “mindfulness products” (Whippman 2016, SR9). Oren Ergas has provided us with another, one many students and faculty will, I suspect, find convincing and helpful. Not Ruth Whippman (2016, SR9) who concludes: “Rather than expending our energy struggling to stay in the Moment, we should simply be grateful that our brains allow us to be elsewhere” I almost agree with her. Mindfulness matters, but does not also being elsewhere?

References

Chambers, Cynthia M., Hasebe-Ludt, Erika, Leggo, Carl and Anita Sinner. Eds. 2012. *A Heart of Wisdom: Life Writing as Empathetic Inquiry*. New York: Peter Lang.

Crary, Jonathan. 1999. *Suspensions of Perception: Attention, Spectacle, and Modern Culture*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press/an October Book.

Kumar, Ashwani. 2013. *Curriculum as Meditative Inquiry*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Sacks, Sam. 2015, December 26-27. The Year of the Triple-Decker. *The Wall Street Journal* CCLXVI, No. 150, C8.

Spring, Joel. 2012. *Education Networks: Power, Wealth, Cyberspace, and the Digital Mind*. New York: Routledge.

Taubman, Peter M. 2011. *Disavowed Knowledge*. New York: Routledge

Whippman, Ruth. 2016, November 27. Actually, Let’s Not Be in the Moment. *The New York Times* CLXVI, No. 57,429, SR9.

Williamson, Ben. 2013. *The Future of the Curriculum. School Knowledge in the Digital Age*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.