

Book Review / Compte rendu

Ragoonaden, Karen (Ed.) (2015). *Mindful Teaching and Learning: Developing a Pedagogy of Well-Being*. Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books. Pages: 115. Price: \$75 USD (hardcover).

Reviewed by Janine Jongbloed, Institut de Recherche sur l'Éducation (IREDU), Université de Bourgogne, France.

Karen Ragoonaden's edited volume *Mindful Teaching and Learning: Developing a Pedagogy of Well-Being* seeks to "initiate exchanges about sustainable Mindfulness practices in Education" (p. xii). To this end, the slim volume provides an overview of the empirical research pertaining to the benefits of mindfulness in an educational context, as well as exploring numerous research projects examining the impact of mindfulness on various actors within the different levels of educational institutions, with a focus on the higher educational context in both the United States and Canada. The treatment of the subject matter is at once extensive but concise: the role of mindfulness in the lives and work of university faculty, university students, K-12 educational administrative staff, and prospective K-12 educators in both university and practicum contexts is explored in the five chapters that follow a brief summary of the empirical findings related to mindfulness in each of these settings. The treatment of these contexts is at once theoretically driven but inherently practical. While reading this volume, one senses the intent to compile a list of useful tools and techniques for use in these varied contexts.

After Ragoonaden's detailed introduction to the chapters included in the collection, Elizabeth Mackenzie reviews the evidence-based literature within the field of contemplative science. Both Ragoonaden and Mackenzie make clear that their definition of mindfulness in education is rooted in the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn on "Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction" (MBSR) in the 1980s and 90s (Kabat-Zinn, 2015; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1998), which has broadened into a more general concept of "mindfulness training" (MT). Mackenzie outlines the outcomes of MT that have been supported empirically in the research, for K-12 students and teachers as well as those in Higher Education (HE) settings. These outcomes include enhancement of: cognitive skills such as working memory capacity and

attention; brain function, including cerebral blood flow (CBF) changes; immune system function; emotional regulation; resiliency; prosocial behavior; and mental health. These effects are typically larger in clinical populations than in the general population, and may operate through other variables such as stress reduction and improved sleep quality. The transdisciplinary nature of the evidence provides a convincing portrait of the benefits of mindfulness interventions.

Karen Ragoonaden returns in the second chapter with a self-study of the experience of incorporating MT into her work as a faculty member. For the purpose of this self-study, she defines mindfulness as “the human capacity for observation, participation, and acceptance of life’s moments from a loving, compassionate stance” and defines well-being as “health in terms of maximizing one’s potential” (p. 17). Her self-study is consistent with the findings from the first chapter in terms of stress reduction and sleep quality in particular, and goes further in emphasizing the benefit of compassionate interactions for both instructors and students. Kathryn Byrnes and Tom Bassarear, in their co-authored chapter, continue this theme by describing their university courses aimed at incorporating contemplative pedagogy and teaching mindfulness within the university context. They deconstruct their approach, which is rooted in Arthur Zajonc’s seven stages of contemplative inquiry (respect, gentleness, intimacy, participation, vulnerability, transformation, and insight (Zajonc, 2009)). An appendix of learning activities provides a toolkit for HE instructors to reference.

The focus changes midway through the collection, turning to “Leaderful Mindsets,” which emphasize the role of mindfulness in educational leadership. In this chapter, Sabre Cherkowski, Kelly Hansen, and Jennifer Kelly take a two-fold approach, exploring how leaders can discover the strengths of others and build communities in educational contexts. Their approach is linked to Jack Whitehead’s notion of “living educational theory” and the stated goal of this research is “learning how to thrive” (p. 64) through a focus on authenticity, curiosity, commitment, and courage. The role of mindfulness in leadership is further developed in the last two chapters, which pertain specifically to K-12 teacher education. Geoffrey Soloway’s chapter titled “Mindfulness-Based Wellness Education” (MBWE) describes three iterations of a university-level course. The learning outcomes of this course are ambitious: mindful teaching, teaching mindfulness, and creating a pedagogy of well-being. Soloway defines a “pedagogy of well-being” as “the integration of mindful wellness into a teacher’s philosophy and practice in the classroom” (p. 80). He views mindfulness as a literacy to be learned by instructors and transmitted to students through the instructor’s own well-being. This chapter makes apparent a weakness (or perhaps simply a misplaced emphasis in the title of this volume): Well-being as a concept in itself is only loosely defined, and the abundance of recent research on well-being is overlooked or intentionally excluded (for example, Jayawickreme, Forgeard, & Seligman, 2012).

The final chapter in this volume, written by Margaret Macintyre Latta, takes a more nuanced theoretical stance. Through very concrete examples of the field experiences of prospective elementary school teachers, Macintyre Latta investigates how curriculum engagement is a mindful practice that is temporal in nature and includes movements between the past, present, and future in the attentiveness to the present moment. Curriculum is positioned as “a mindful knowing in action” (p. 100) and the conjuncture of theory and practice as described by Dewey is illustrated in the real interactions between

student teachers and learners. This thoughtful chapter provides inspiring concluding remarks that spur educators to mindful action; however, the reader feels the want of a concluding chapter to bring together these varied research projects into a united (but diverse) way forward from mindfulness to well-being.

This slender book delivers a variety of practical tools with a careful attentiveness to both individual and institutional contexts. These tools are most explicitly developed for use in teacher education programs in HE institutions. Empirical (quantitative) evidence provides a foundational legitimacy for the individual (qualitative) research projects that follow, which may be viewed as a helpful complementarity or perhaps an unnecessarily appeal to differently positioned publics. Those interested in mindfulness and how it pertains to HE, as well as those wanting to put MT to use in HE, will find this book of utility. Those more interested in the notion of well-being and how it can be used and defined in educational contexts may be disappointed to find that this neighboring concept plays a more obscured role within the text.

In conclusion, this volume performs well in regard to its intent to initiate exchanges and will be appreciated by those aiming to put mindfulness into practice in HE. 🍁

References

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