

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Berila, B. (2016). *Integrating mindfulness into anti-oppression pedagogy: Social justice in higher education*. New York: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group. Pages: 181. Price: 45.99 USD. (paper).**

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Beth Berila thoughtfully illuminates the intersection between the practice of mindfulness and social justice education in her book, *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy*. The subtitle of her book, *Social Justice in Higher Education*, highlights the intended audience for her writing. Berila expresses the purpose in writing her book as “my desire to help us interrupt oppression at its roots in our bodies, our hearts, and our minds” (p. x). In speaking to the manner in which mindfulness practices can broaden student perspectives in courses that deal with diversity, she reveals the complex ways in which student experiences shape learning and understanding.

Demystifying the status quo of power relations and uncovering the ways in which these relationships work to sustain oppression is the basis for anti-oppression pedagogy. Contemplative practices encourage an embodied self-awareness and understanding. In merging the two, Berila proposes a mindful anti-oppression pedagogy that promotes an embodied social justice understanding. As an instructor who has taught courses with social justice themes, I am always interested in the experiences of my students and the responses they have to course material, but I had not considered how these experiences might be deeply held in their bodies. Berila encourages all instructors engaged in social justice education to attend to the ways in which classroom learning experiences impact students in a physical sense. Her book addresses these themes by critically framing mindful anti-oppression pedagogy and suggesting possible learning experiences for instructors of social justice education.

Each chapter begins with a thorough analysis and discussion on how mindfulness can be linked to and complement anti-oppression pedagogy. These sections are carefully structured and offer a theoretical framework for thinking about mindfulness practices in social justice education. This theoretical grounding pulls the reader into Berila's central argument: that an integration of mindfulness practices with anti-oppression pedagogy

will lead to a deeper understanding of social justice issues and self reflection. Social justice education is a process. The intersectionality of identity, power, privilege and oppression reminds us that structural forces underpin inequities in our society. But social justice work has to also happen “at the level of the individual, as we unlearn prejudicial ideologies and oppressive ways of being” (p.173). Berila describes the ways in which diversity and difference are embodied by students in their experiences, values, beliefs, and identities within communities. Untangling students’ behaviours and beliefs at their core is the purpose for her compassionate use of mindfulness practices in her classroom.

In Chapter 1, Berila presents an anti-oppression pedagogy framework and introduces us to the idea of mindfulness and its usefulness for engaging students. This chapter allows readers to situate themselves in the context of social justice education. Critical reflection is usually a part of social justice courses, but mindfulness allows for a focus on not only what students are thinking, but on what they are feeling.

Contemplative practices enable students to cultivate emotional intelligence, learn to sit with difficult emotions, recognize deeply entrenched narratives they use to interpret the world, cultivate compassion for other people, and become more intentional about how they respond in any given moment. (p. 15)

We are invited to move beyond a teaching style that engages only the cognitive abilities of our students, to incorporating practices that allow them to consider issues more deeply and from multiple perspectives. The ideas introduced in this chapter are developed and explored as themes in the chapters that follow.

Berila examines the importance of bringing the body into a mindful anti-oppression pedagogy in Chapter 2. Her thinking is grounded in feminist theory of the body as a “site of knowledge” (p. 38) and the pervasive disembodiment of self that persists in our culture. In higher education, embodied knowing is often ignored. Berila shares stories of her students that speak to the powerful impact that class discussions related to issues of identity can have; this impact is visible in their gestures, voices, and their silence. Berila suggests that contemplative practices can support students in developing critical self-reflection skills and tools that will allow them to analyze, confront, and respond to their experiences.

The task of recognizing and “unlearning” internalized oppression is taken up in Chapter 3. “We hold our life experiences in our bodies and in our psyches” (p. 80). Mindfulness practices can help students unlearn harmful scripts about themselves and others and connect new perspectives to wider diversity themes at an institutional and structural level. Closely connected to unlearning oppression is the theme of deconstructing privilege, taken up in chapter 4.

Chapter 5 invites the reader to reframe student resistance. Berilla describes types of student resistance and suggests that framing resistance as dissonance is more useful. Dissonance is not just experienced in a cognitive sense however, but in an emotional and psychological capacity as well. Reactions to competing ideologies can cause frustration, anger, and defensiveness, but this sense of dissonance is essential for shifting student perspectives and understandings. Encouraging students to employ a social justice lens may allow them to successfully address their discomfort and move to incorporate new perspectives into their worldview. Berilla presents scenarios in this chapter that illustrate the ways in which her students have responded to dissonance. She generously shares experiences from her practice and insights she has gained from infusing particular con-

templative approaches into her teaching. Each chapter concludes with specific tips and practical steps for incorporating the principles of mindfulness into a classroom setting. These are useful sections that benefit educators like myself, who want to consider incorporating these practices into our teaching.

Berila acknowledges the tensions and challenges that exist for instructors beginning to take up this orientation in their work. In chapter 6 she addresses four main criticisms related to the use of contemplative practices in higher educational settings and argues that these criticisms provoke questions that anti-oppression courses are uniquely equipped to address. Her final chapter suggests several mindfulness practices that will encourage students to develop a deep awareness of power, privilege and oppression and a capacity to interrogate these concepts.

Some questions remain. What are the barriers for educators in incorporating contemplative practices in their classrooms? To what extent can embodied knowledge exist in a setting that values rational and critical thought? While social justice courses encourage critical self-reflection about ideologies and power, deep personal reflection is not usually part of this learning experience. Students understand the concepts in an intellectual sense, but have more difficulty applying this knowledge to their own lives.

While the intended audience for *Integrating Mindfulness into Anti-Oppression Pedagogy: Social Justice in Higher Education* is educators who teach about diversity issues, any instructor interested in contemplative approaches to practice and invested in understanding the ways in which student identity shapes understanding will also benefit from reading this insightful and inspiring text. Indeed, educators invested in social justice pedagogy will be convinced of the merit of incorporating a mindfulness practice of anti-oppression pedagogy into their classrooms. The value of providing a meaningful process for students as they come to understand oppressive practices in their personal lives and unlearn patterns of privilege is the hope that this deeper learning can transform their thinking and sense of self in our classrooms and beyond. 🍁