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Mindfulness as Method: Teaching for Connection in a Dehumanizing Context

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Anti-racist education can arguably be called an oxymoron in and of itself. Take, for example, that in schools across the nation, low-income students of color continue to be taught by teachers, mostly white, female and from middle-class backgrounds (Sleeter, 2001). Those teachers arrive in schools with strategies and methods for teaching underprivileged young people, strategies that are taught in both traditional university courses and alternative certification programs. The idea is that with the "right" method, the achievement gap between races can be closed. Myriad scholars and educators have called out the flawed logic in thinking that decontextualized strategies can stand a chance against a deeply stratified society that is reproduced with disturbing efficiency through schooling (e.g., Bartolomé, 1994; Freire, 1970; Ladson-Billings, 2006; Luke, 2011). As a contrast, humanizing pedagogy has long been a goal of formal and informal education (Freire, 1970). But for teachers, particularly beginning teachers, precisely how to engage in a humanizing pedagogy is elusive. Put more simply, for teachers committed to liberatory, anti-racist education, there's a large gap of knowledge between grab bags of methods and mission statements about humanization and social justice. In this article, we argue that part of what is missing is a deliberate humanizing of the teaching and learning experience, within teacher education. We share our attempts to use the contemplative practices of mindfulness out of a direct desire to teach and learn through human connection. The authors include the course instructor and graduate students from a masters level course in literacy methods that occurred in Fall 2012 with a cohort of beginning teachers preparing to teach in urban contexts. We provide a brief overview of the mindfulness practices used in the course, the justifications of why, and then snippets of our conversations as we discussed what this approach afforded. We close with cautions for how to proceed with mindfulness as methods in education.

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Context (from Leigh)

In the Fall of 2012, approximately 25 Donovan Urban Teaching Scholars (the Donovan Urban Teaching Scholar Program is a cohort-based program for teachers dedicated to urban education) continued their year-long cohort program of teacher education with a course entitled, "Literacy Practices and Assessment." As a cohort, the Donovans, as they are affectionately known to themselves and others, had already spent an intensive summer together studying educational foundations and building group cohesion. As the instructor of this course and as a lifelong educator committed to liberatory practices, as well as someone versed in the mind-body practices of yoga and meditation, I had often felt the divide between how higher education views knowledge as residing in the mind (read this; write that), and how contemplative practices see mind and body intertwined. Implicit in the almost exclusive mind focus of the teacher preparation is a theory of change that if beginning teachers read and write enough about oppression, well, they'll simply stop those practices. As decades of research shows, though, even changing the written word often does not result in equity, as evidenced by the ongoing challenge of desegregating our nation's schools (Frankenberg & Orfield, 2012).

I had always known there was something significant missing or misaligned with how we prepared teachers for working with populations consistently

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dispossessed in society, but I had also grappled for what might be a better, or at least more humanizing way of going about this important work. I also felt the need to more holistically support politically conscious teachers, many of whom are people of color, as they engage in the herculean efforts to interrupt the deeply oppressive practices visited on them and their students every day. In fact, this was one of the key areas of focus in the Donovan cohort, which was composed overwhelmingly by racially minoritized adults, many of whom were first-time college-goers in their families.

As I was listening to a radio program which highlighted the ways that meditation has been proven to be effective for interrupting the post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms for children and teens who had lived in highly volatile circumstances (van der Volk, 2006), something clicked for me. As someone who had experienced both the benefits of this kind of practice for interrupting the cacophony of pride, blame, anger and hurt that races through our minds seemingly all day, and as a woman of color who has comes from and has taught in low-income settings, I saw an opportunity to interrupt the decontextualized politeness of best practice methods textbooks and make teacher education more personal and hopefully more humanizing. I also saw a unique opportunity to address specifically spirit and connection with this group of educators where "community" already existed and where we had taken for granted the need to better support teachers and children of color grappling with racist societal structures.

I started each class session with 2-3 minutes of meditation, guiding students through with common instructions of sitting quietly, with eyes closed, to notice their breath, to feel the new space that they were in, and to note this classroom and the cohort as special, as different from the rest of their days. At first, I couched the practice as akin to the tradition in many Eastern homes where one removes her shoes in a physical and metaphorical move that notes home as a sacred space. The next week, I shared some of the neurobiology science that documents meditation as a powerful practice for calming down the central nervous system, and we discussed the necessity of this in modern-day screen-saturated lives as well as within contexts where society has deposited the majority of its daily violence: low-income communities of color. There were no readings on the topic; I wanted to have us change our practices to then notice how our habits of mind might also change. In addition to the dedicated moments of meditation, we also practiced discussion approaches where the emphasis was on listening, rather than waiting to talk. For example, in one partner activity, each person shared some of their most basic fears about how they are perceived, and the other person's response was not to comment but to repeat what they had heard as important through the first person's sharing. These kinds of intentional pausing and listening came to mark the ethos of our class. It became clear over the course of the semester that by engaging in a mindful practice that held central the goal to rehumanize ourselves and others, we were creating more space for transformation. As a critical educator and researcher, this felt (felt tactilely, not metaphorically) different from tried and true academic exercises of deconstruction.

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Challenges

Below are some themes of affordances and challenges we have discussed from this shared approach to teacher education.

Leigh: What was most beneficial about this unorthodox approach to teacher education?

Dan: The most important contemplative aspect of the class was our unrelenting focus on students' authentic, dynamic personhoods, as exemplified by Thich Nhat Hanh's poem "Please Call Me by My True Names" and its phrase "every second I am arriving." We were really trying to discover students and their educational landscapes for what they are: unmoored from a stable, reductionist description.

Jianan: I believe that being contemplative is one of the most important skills a teacher can acquire. Our generation of teachers, especially ones who get into the field to work in urban schools, are seduced by this methods fetish because it is a safer way to teach. By hoarding "proven" methods, the teacher is able to protect him or herself because that is the way "experts" say we should teach. While I am not saying these methods are not important – they are highly important —it is only half the story. The other half depends on how the teacher is able to see him or herself in the classroom and how they can be open to being vulnerable to their students. I find it ironic that a teacher might be an advocate about climbing up Bloom's taxonomy of skills (a classification of learning objectives within education), but not give the time of day to being mindful, a skill that I consider to be one of the most difficult higher order cognitive abilities. While the readings were highly effective at probing ourselves as teachers and our beliefs about urban education, I felt the silences in the classroom were critical for me to continue to build my own identity. Starting the class with five minutes of silence allowed me to sit with myself and think about how I was feeling. It then allowed me to sift through my thoughts and emotions and transition into a state of being that would optimally prepare me for class.

Jessica: The applications to a humanistic pedagogy, to me, are obvious. First, instead of unconsciously dehumanizing each other as only teacher-practitioners in a standardized cohort model, we were consciously inter-

rupted in that framework when we were asked to simply listen to each other. Second, the act of simply listening goes against what Kevin Kumashiro (2012) got at when he described the ideological frame Americans have of "the educator"—as someone blathering at the front of the room. Rather, to be vulnerable and listen as a potential educator is to step outside of the frame that the educator is a constant speaker. We were teaching each other—and learning about each other—through silence; through mindful listening.

Kat[harine]: For me, this practice was paramount in the humanizing of the teacher prep process because it served as a weekly reminder of my humanity. Too often last semester I was running on empty but trying to keep going. Those few moments of silence brought me back to my own body where I became conscious of my needs and the energies I had absorbed from my students that day (feelings of excitement, being burdened, stress, etc.). Furthermore, I think this practice has implications in our classrooms. Just as we Donovans enter classrooms thrilled to see each other and very high in energy, our students enter our classrooms in various heightened emotional states. I believe that this practice can serve the same function of bringing them back to their bodies and forming a collective energy level before the beginning of classwork.

We also discussed the challenges of undertaking a mindful practice in a system of schooling, both K-12 and higher education that is modeled after a factory where knowledge is to be deposited into the seemingly empty vessels of students' minds (Freire, 1970). Additionally, we discussed the implicit capitalist structure of society in which education takes place that first has us see ourselves as individuals in competition with each other.

Dan: I was initially sort of afraid that our meditative moments would serve merely as ornamentation to a class that was still successful in its other core facets. Luckily, the facilitation you provided was very much meant for an authentic, if expedient, moment of calm self-awareness. Compared to some kooky yoga and Buddhist "churches" I have seen and heard about before, I was glad that the group's silent minutes together were truly beneficial to our mental states. By extension, they were beneficial for our talk on teaching and our students whom we talked about.

Education takes place in the implicit capitalistic structure of society.

Jessica: The hesitations I have are cosmetic—that administrators and coteachers in "real world" environments will not "get it" or think I am undermining content teaching, or that mindfulness may become another buzzword devoid of real meaning in pedagogical literature. That opening a class with meditation may become about as humanistic and rich as writing a "Do Now" on the board—that is to say, yet another mechanistic, rote activity. Of course, this all depends on how the exercise is used. When it does become part of the "methodology grab-bag," of course it is useless—and of course students can and will respond negatively to that perception. When it is carefully facilitated as a response to and support for students, situated within the context and necessity of the school site, of course students can and will respond positively to the reality of the practice.

Jianan: What we do [in teacher education and schools] is normally dehumanizing, built for burnout. This is an anti-burnout practice. But it would be trickier outside of the Donovan group because we buy in to each other. How would it work with random students?

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are given the opportunities to make a visible and effective difference in the world beyond the school. "Action civics" enables students to do civics and behave as citizens by engaging in a cycle of research, action and reflection about problems they care about personally while learning about deeper principles of effective civic and especially political action. Organizations around the country are partnering with urban schools and districts to provide students such opportunities, including Mikva Challenge, Public Achievement, Generation Citizen, Youth on Board, and Earth Force. These initiatives are also supported by the National Action Civics Collaborative, which is beginning to train additional teachers, policy makers, and district leaders in action civics.

Moving Forward

Public schools have always been charged with the responsibility of making Americans, and hence, of (re)making America. The decisions we make about how to educate our and others' children are at their heart decisions about how we conceive of the world we live in now and how to create the world we want to inhabit in the future. I argue that solving the civic empowerment gap is a central responsibility of schools (and other public institutions); it is a necessary precondition of our claim to be a democratic nation. But the task is not without danger. It risks exposing fissures in our national identity and democracy that many people would rather keep under wraps. It also risks upending our collective understanding of who we are, both empirically and aspirationally—including by revealing that no such collective understanding exists. We must confront these risks clear-headedly and honestly if schools are truly to tackle the civic empowerment gap in a meaningful way.

Notwithstanding both the challenges and even the dangers, the pursuit of democratic equality and legitimacy is a laudable and necessary goal. As schools put these reforms into place, they will provide students and teachers with a set of powerful civic experiences that are likely to increase their efficacy and engagement, and hence to inspire their acquisition of civic knowledge and skills as well as continued productive participation. In doing so, schools will also help strengthen local communities and the nation as a whole, both via the direct work that students accomplish and by building a new generation of mobilized, empowered adults.

Reducing the civic empowerment gap also strengthens democracy. It broadens government's representativeness, increases its responsiveness to diverse individuals and communities, and thereby also reinforces its political legitimacy in the eyes of historically disenfranchised community members. It strengthens schools, as students turn their attention to solving problems collaboratively as opposed to fighting against the system or just checking out. And finally, it promotes civic and political equality and fairness—ideals that are central to our American democracy. These are goals that all schools—and all citizens—can and should embrace. ❑

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It would need more of a data/science explanation front-ended and may be a longer process to build buy-in in the group.

Kat: I'm a yoga and meditation practitioner. And, even for me, initially, there was a little of me that felt a little angry for the sake of being resistant. [laughing] I'm not sure why that came out of me. I was frustrated perhaps that a lot of the stuff in [the social context of education class] was an overlap from undergrad and there wasn't any time to focus on what do we do with that. So I thought, alright! Here's a literacy course, here we go with methods. And then, oh my gosh, here we go again with schools and society and racism. But then, with the practices of meditation and truly listening, we started to articulate voices of dissensions, democratic discourse, and it wasn't combative for the sake of it, but deepening the conversations. I could see the transformation in myself from one extreme to the other. There was something in the process of community-building that was transformative.

Dan: We came in looking for something very specific. We came out with teflon minds, able to let the distractions of separation slide off of us.

The way forward is both together and mindful.

Although it was not in the explicit design, the practices of meditation and being intentional with each other started to chip away at one of the core requirements of an oppressive society: that we are separate and in competition with each other. The Donovan cohort and all of the authors of this article represent a variety of standpoints in society: young adult, middle-aged, white, people of color, varying sexual identities, varyingly abled, etc. What the method of being mindful afforded us was a chance to touch stone to our core humanity, to be in our bodies and to be present so that we could engage more wholeheartedly in our collective learning. We also share these practices with some trepidation, particularly to the field of education, which knows how to homogenize and flatten almost any vibrant practice. In a sense, schools come by this honestly, as they are modeled after factories. In the desire to "scale up," though, we have to remain vigilant about not reducing and removing the human element to teaching. At its core, teaching and learning as well as social movements are relational activities. Perhaps the only proven method for being in a generative relationship for the social good is to be mindfully human and humanizing. ❑