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# Democracy & Education

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## Mindfulness, Democracy, and Education

*Andrea Marie Hyde and James G. LaPrad*

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### **Abstract**

In this article, we explain how mindfulness can enhance a democratic way of being, connecting practices of awareness, reflection, dialog, and action to democratic citizenship and social arrangements. We begin by sharing our understanding of democracy as a philosophy and a political system. We then provide a background for the concept of mindfulness as it is used by those in the field of education and health care and as we connect it to democracy and democratic education. We introduce a mindfulness pedagogy and use this pedagogy to develop our concept of mindfully democratic schools. We use the work of John Dewey and Paulo Freire, along with other philosophers of education, to address concerns that mindfulness is fundamentally an apolitical and individual practice rather than a social practice. We end by sharing how mindful practices are imagined and supported within democratic public schools with three vignettes from the Coalition of Essential Schools, whose vision and principles promote teachers' and students' mindfully democratic action. In doing this, we describe the types of schools that we see as necessary for our vision of democracy. We invite readers to offer their own stories of mindfully democratic schools.

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**I**N THIS ARTICLE, we explain how mindfulness can enhance a democratic way of being, connecting practices of awareness, reflection, dialogue, and action to democratic citizenship and social arrangements. Democracy itself is a contested concept, and one that we feel should remain unfinished, as democracy is always in the making (Dewey, 1916). With this in mind, we begin by sharing our understanding of democracy as a philosophy and a political system. We then provide a background for the concept of mindfulness as it is used by those in the field of education and health care and set the boundaries for how we will use the term here, as we connect it to democracy and democratic education. We introduce a three-pronged mindfulness pedagogy that includes mindful teaching, teaching mindfulness, and engagement in mindful practices, and use this pedagogy to develop our concept of mindfully democratic schools. We use the work of

Dewey and Freire, along with other philosophers of education, to address concerns that mindfulness is fundamentally an apolitical and individual practice rather than a social practice. Though we are

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ANDREA HYDE is an associate professor at Western Illinois University. Andrea studies school-based yoga and mindfulness programs in K-12 and higher education and relates this work to critical pedagogy and social justice education.

JIM LA PRAD is an associate professor at Western Illinois University. His teaching and scholarship include experiential education, philosophy of education, multicultural education, and transformative educational leadership. He is the 2008 National Society for Experiential Education's Higher Education Leader of the Year.

not attempting to locate mindfulness in the works of Dewey and Freire, we wish to point out areas of compatibilities and resonance to support our position that mindfulness is compatible with democratic life.

We end by sharing how mindful practices are imagined and supported within democratic public schools with three vignettes from the Coalition of Essential Schools, whose vision and principles promote teachers' and students' mindfully democratic action. In doing this, we describe the types of schools that we see as necessary for our vision of democracy.

## Democracy

Democracy contains a few fundamental philosophical principles that often create tension, but without them, democracy would be something different. Freedom and equality are two. Gutmann (1987) described these fundamental democratic principles as “nondiscrimination” (equality of justice before the law and the equal worth of each citizen) and “nonrepression” (freedom of expression and the pursuit of happiness and freedom from unnecessary government intrusion) and maintained that public schools must operate according to these principles and teach them directly in order to consciously reproduce democratic society. These might be thought of as the rights of democratic citizenship that have been associated with liberal democracy. Another foundational principle of democracy is continual revision; a democracy holds its own current practices open to revision based on the needs of society as it changes. This might be thought of as the responsibility of democratic citizenship.

Dewey's challenge to a traditional or liberal view of democracy, in *Democracy and Education* (1916), is usually contrasted as participatory. Where liberal democracy could be oversimplified as a state of maximum freedom from government interference and freedom to pursue individual desires, participatory democracy requires an engaged citizenry, working across communities of difference to examine and revise social arrangements. This is in keeping with a pragmatic, evolutionary view of social life as continually changing and adapting. But as a moral way of being, democracy means recognizing social interdependency and working to safeguard social responsibility. Our understanding of participatory democracy also includes what Parker called “associative democracy” (Parker, 1996). According to Dewey (1966/1916), a democratic society has two requirements: (a) it is composed of groups with many and varied interests that are consciously communicated; (b) there are varied and free points of contact with other groups, open relationships, where what is healthy are those relationships that foster more future interactions, not fewer. This conception sees democracy as a mode of associated living, an unfinished process, a “lived social phenomenon” (Ross, 2014, p. 152), which is “much broader than any particular view of political democracy” (Thayer-Bacon, 2006, p. 21). It reflects Dewey's idea of human interdependency, where a healthy society, like a healthy individual, depends on face-to-face interactions. Parker (1996) and others have gone further, to associate the term *democratic* with pluralism in reference to the vital importance of diversity—of ideas, of experiences—to a healthy democracy. While we also see

this as rhetorically valuable for arguments in support of a strong and systematic pluralistic and multicultural education, we use the term *justice-oriented* to identify our critical and emancipatory ideal of democratic action, including democratic education. Our conception of democracy then is critically participatory.

From this perspective, democracy, as a political system, is associated with an ideal of governance that takes popular sovereignty as a right and popular activism—including criticism and review of the status quo—as a responsibility. The requirement of equality of citizens as sovereigns and critics is necessary in order to prevent the coalescing of power—which may be a natural tendency in human societies (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). This coalescing of power at the hands of those groups and individuals who have been historically privileged by birth or by nondemocratic structures previous to or existing within a democratically organized society is a threat to any democracy. In countering this threat, the democratic education of its entire citizenry must be a public interest and practice (Dewey, 1927/1991).

In healthy democratic societies, individuals and groups join together to critique the status quo and organize for corrective action when the balances of power become intolerable. But here, knowledge of injustice must precede corrective action. In the United States, faith in the philosophy of democracy may be confused with the assumption of the practice of democracy in all social spaces. Vigilance against injustices facilitated by our popularly elected representatives or corporate “citizens” is sometimes preempted by a belief that equality for citizens has been legally achieved or is constitutionally protected. Criticism is easily confused with a lack of faith in democracy, when it is fundamentally a requisite part of democracy. Spring (2008) warned that such a dogmatic democratism functions as a hegemonic “wheel in the head”—a deliberately disseminated and legitimating idea meant to control behavior (p. 3). Critical awareness requires a practice of continual awakening. Here is where mindfulness, as a pedagogical practice, has a place in democratic education.

## Mindfulness

The bulk of the literature on mindfulness and education is devoted to its many health, especially social and emotional, benefits. Though frequently acknowledged that practices of mindfulness in education constitute work toward peaceful ends, there has been little scholarship connecting mindfulness directly to democracy.

Mindfulness is often positioned as equivalent to seated meditation and stilling the mind, but it is actually much broader. In educational applications, mindfulness may refer to any one of a host of practices but usually includes relaxation techniques, breathing practices, and movement (yoga). More generally, mindfulness is “a natural human capacity, which involves observing, participating and accepting each of life's moments from a state of equilibrium or loving kindness” (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012, p. 2). When used in discussing applications for educational settings, scholars, researchers, and trainers seem to have settled on variations of the same definition of mindfulness, taken from the work of Kabat-Zinn (2003): “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and

non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience” (p. 145). Mindfulness suspends ruminations of the past and projections about the future. It is self-oriented but dissolves the atomistic notion of the self. It is universe- or other-oriented but takes the first-person experience as the object of study. It holds an attitude of kindness, curiosity, openness and unfinishedness. It is not primarily an intellectual activity; it is centered in the body and takes up feeling and awareness as the informational environment.

However, our definition of mindfulness requires a particular ethical component, compatible with a Freirean (Freire, 1970/2000) democratic philosophy or critical pedagogy: plurality, equity, patient attention (listening), critical revision, and care for the self and others with an aim toward reducing oppression, injustice, and suffering. The starting point for this is in uncovering our own oppressive thoughts toward ourselves and working toward releasing them. Roeser and Pinela (2014) called this “compassion training,” where compassion is “the capacity to feel, and wish to relieve, the suffering of others” (p. 14). They further explained:

*Previous research findings indicate that mindfulness and compassion trainings can cultivate a specific set of expert skills and dispositions in adults. These include self-regulatory (focused attention) and social-cognitive skills (perspective taking), habits of self-awareness and self-evaluation (self-compassion), and motivational dispositions (generosity). (p. 15)*

Mindfulness practices seem to shift practitioners away from their “conceptual selves”—the storied self, complete with biases and prejudices—and bring them in contact with their “experiential selves,” which arise from sensory experience of the external and internal environment at present (Roeser & Pinela, 2014, p. 20). Critics of the extension of mindfulness to areas outside of spiritual studies are concerned that offering it as self help, turns people away from social consciousness or action. However, self-investigation and reflection are necessary to uncover and challenge long-held mental scripts that see different others as the competition or the enemy. Ehrenhalt (2014) said, “The roots of assumptions run deep, and extracting them can seem too grueling, too arduous, a task for Sisyphus. It’s easy to get stuck, letting the mind fester in a gully of apathy and guilt . . . Mindfulness dragged me out of the gutter” (para. 6–7). This complements intellectual work in critical philosophy and empirical work in social action or advocacy (Hyde, 2013). This necessary work on the self is also required for challenging master narratives of democratic citizenship, where the good, “productive,” citizen votes, obeys the law, and contributes financially to society by paying taxes and supporting themselves through paid work (Westheimer & Kahne, 2004), which is the dominant interpretation of democratic citizenship held by many of our students (Hyde, 2011).

Critics are also right to point out that the term *mindfulness* has been used to brand commercial products including training courses that promise mental efficiency and increased effectiveness in the sense of being better than your former self or your competitors. This is especially true where institutions of power (e.g., corporations and the military) have adopted the practice of

mindfulness as meditation separated from its Buddhist origins and devoid of all ethical content. Here mindfulness may “unwittingly reinforce self-centered and conformist values and behaviors of society” (Forbes, 2012, para 6). Buddhist practitioners and teachers who belong to the Mindfulness in Education Network often discuss this concern through listserv conversations, while others have been focused on making the practices secularly appropriate for public schools. For some, this makes the practices accessible to all people and culturally sensitive.

Like so many customs and practices that have been sanitized of culture for the sake of removing controversy, the effects of positioning mindfulness as a science-based, secular practice has the effect of reinforcing the miseducative idea that everything we do in the public schools is ahistorical, acultural or apolitical. We want to be careful not to assist in further cultural appropriation by interpreting mindfulness as merely a host of human practices, where the term to describe these practices can be traced to a particular non-Western tradition. The presentation of mindfulness is a complication that is pretty common in democratic education, especially critical pedagogy: making content accessible to all, while recognizing nondominant cultures in an effort to support more complete knowledge and history (Giroux, 2011). Intentionally making use of practices originating in non-Western cultures adds to the democratic conversation (Douglass, 2011).

At the same time, contemplative studies, a larger category of practices that might usefully be said to contain mindfulness as meditation and mindful movement practices, includes Western practices from Christian and other spiritual traditions, for example, labyrinth walking or *lectio divina* (Duerr, 2014). Contemplation is the epistemology of mindfulness. As a method of inquiry comprehensible in Western philosophy, contemplation is compatible with Dewey’s idea of knowing.

In describing the interdisciplinary field of contemplative studies, Brown professor Roth has posited three ways of knowing: the rational, the sensory-empirical, and the contemplative. Mindfulness employs this third way of knowing, which is actually a form of critical first-person investigation (Roth, 2006, p. 1787). Contemplation is methodologically scientific in that it involves gathering data empirically, and nonjudgmentally, through the senses. The fruit of contemplative practices is “knowing,” which is not advanced as any final truth claim but rather exemplifies Dewey’s idea of warranted assertibility (Dewey, 1938). “By ‘knowing’ Dewey means inquiry in a world that is not static. He means inquiry into things ‘lived’ by people” (Boyles, 2006, p. 8).

Neither mindfulness nor democracy can be required of people; they must choose it and practice it for themselves. As well, in both cases, the practitioner-citizen is the only qualified evaluator of the practice and the only one who can critique and revise the practice, upon careful observation and reflection. Notably, in both cases as well, more experienced teachers can offer their own practices as models and share insights through dialogues with students toward the development of the students’ practice. However, the citizens’ job is much more complicated, in that her revision efforts must be conducted collectively, within a series of plural social environments. Democracy requires constant

deliberation across difference without end, without ultimate resolution; it is always unfinished. Likewise, mindfulness supports a process-oriented, rather than an ends-oriented, way of being.

In the remainder of this section, we explain how mindfulness can enhance a democratic way of being, connecting practices of awareness, reflection, dialogue, and action to democratic citizenship and social arrangements, through the work of educational philosophers Dewey and Freire. In the final section, we describe how these practices are imagined and supported within mindfully democratic schools, exemplified by the Coalition of Essential Schools.

## **Mindfulness and Democratic Educational Philosophy**

### ***John Dewey***

To locate mindfulness in the pedagogy of democratic education, it is important to reinforce this placement in the democratic philosophies of education. We would be remiss if we did not begin with Dewey, who contributed much of his academic work to elucidating and defending the natural relationship between democracy and education. While Dewey never wrote specifically about what we identify as mindfulness or mindfulness pedagogy, we can theoretically map out elements from his body of work that strengthen our conceptual framework for mindfully democratic schools.

Dewey (1896) seminally laid the foundation for the organic, situated, and seamless relationship of awareness, reflection, and action in everyday living. Dewey (1897) explained that the education process has two sides to it, one psychological and the other social, and warned that these must be neither dichotomized nor imbalanced. Rogers (2002) distilled Dewey's procedure for thinking from *How We Think* (1910/1933) as "presence to experience," "description of experience," "analysis of experience," and "intelligent action/experimentation" (p. 856). Dewey's educational philosophy attempted to balance the inner (personal) with the outer (social), taking a mindful pedagogy to an active state in the world. This is extremely important where democracy is a possibility as both an ideal and a practice; the school becomes "fundamentally an institution erected by society to do certain specific work—to exercise a certain specific function in maintaining the life and advancing the welfare of society" (Dewey, 1909, p. 13). This welfare includes ideas and actions that must be contemplated, deliberated, and acted upon. Dewey (1916) exulted that in a democracy, education must be a public interest and a public good always readjusting itself to sustain human flourishing. Likewise, we recognize that development of mindfulness in a person is not a public end in itself; it is a criterion of democratic education and democratic ways of being, which implies a social and moral way of being.

Later, Dewey (1922) explained an important component to contemplating, deliberating, and acting upon public interests and goods when he conceptualized the dramatic rehearsal as part of our social psychology. Here, the consciousness is described as the "delicate connection between highly organized habits and unorganized impulses" (p. 128). In day-to-day experiences within our environment, we receive countless impulses, and our mind sequences these impulses and experiences. Our habits together

with past experiences grasp and comprehend the impulses, reconstructing both to make our actions become effective.

However, in the ebb and flow of our existence, in particular situations, our habits become impeded as conflict and friction arise in novel situations. Dewey (1920) explained that as an impulse is received and released, there is an attempt to restore unity to conduct in the consciousness (a mindful activity). Old habits are checked and broken down to define the obstacles of the ongoing activity.

Dewey (1922) pointed out that "activity does not cease in order to give way to reflection; activity is turned from execution into intra-organic channels, resulting in the dramatic rehearsal" (p. 133). Mindfulness is the condition of reflection, and a mindful state can facilitate the dramatic rehearsal. Recall that mindfulness focuses awareness, not emptiness of mind. Crediting James, Dewey explained that it is our willful commitment that keeps "imagination dwelling upon those objects which are congenial to it" (p. 136). And emotion that contributes in ordering and prioritizing the habits and impulses which "magnifies all objects that are congruous with it, smothers those which are opposed" (p. 136). Emotion provides a momentum in the deliberation process allowing us to grasp what is important and subdue that which is not. Mindfulness allows us to train ourselves in bringing attention to our sensations, emotions, and thoughts, keeping all in balance yet without denial or restriction. James (1892/2001) said that "an education which should improve this faculty," repeatedly returning the wandering mind to a single object of contemplation (attention), "would be the education par excellence" (p. 95).

For example, a young novice teacher must be mindful when asking her class a question. Once the question leaves the teacher's mouth, eager hands rise to respond with answers. She likely will feel compelled to select the first student to raise a hand. She feels emotionally relieved that her question was heard and there is a respondent; however, her selection of a respondent will have ethical consequences. The mindful teacher recognizes and balances the dynamics of the socially constructed classroom climate and pauses to contemplate who to call on and what the intention of the question was. The mindful teacher becomes engaged in a dramatic rehearsal, recognizing the social and ethical implications of their actions. Practice as usual privileges the active, assertive student, usually those who are affirmed by the mainstream culture of the school while inadvertently silencing others (Boler, 2004). Scanning the raised hands, the teacher recognizes the need to facilitate access to the hoped-for discussion for the less active students, perhaps some of whom represent less powerful social groups. The teacher believes these students may also have a valuable contribution to the learning activity, and that their inclusion will further engage them with the class.

In the example above, the personal and the social aspects of education identified in Dewey's educational philosophy are apparent. Mindfulness in our educational practices opens a space for the ethical domain; one that potentially balances the instrumentality that today's technological world brings. If we recognize the symbiotic relationship between democracy and education, we see that mindful education is useful, perhaps required, for our

continuity and growth. It prevents our principles (habits) from becoming static. Mindfulness allows the continuous readjustment of our teaching practices.

### **Paulo Freire**

Like Dewey, Freire never wrote specifically on what we identify as mindfulness or mindfulness pedagogy. However, mindfulness pedagogies are enhanced when united with Freire's educational philosophies. These connections are mapped out as we build on Dewey's recognition that education must have a social component within a democratic society. Mindfulness and mindfulness pedagogy have the potential to become critical in the Freirean sense in the act of conscientization (*conscientização*), the process of developing a critical social consciousness, starting with liberating the self from oppressive beliefs, and *praxis*, reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it to be more socially just.

According to Freire (2000), conscientization is a necessary prerequisite of liberation since the oppressed are unconscious to their agency in history or, worse, under a false consciousness that serves the oppressor. This is a result of being uneducated or miseducated to believe that things are as they must or should be; they are unaware of the benefit to the oppressor of their complicity and ignorance. Mindfulness practice can raise the consciousness of one's personal and social position by putting one in touch with the world as it really is, through the simple practice of nonjudgmental awareness.

For example, many educators believe that knowledge is power. By this they mean that formal (credentialing) education is a way out of poverty and the means to personal happiness and material success. What is often missing from this thin liberal-utopian vision is a critique of schooling as a place of banking education, where instead of being empowered, students are actually kept from realizing their ability to choose what they learn and how to participate in making changes in the world. Freire (1998) challenged educators to become true liberators, explaining that those who empower take a "radical stance on the defense of the legitimate interests of the human person." He subtly reminded us, "The place upon which a new rebellion should be built is not the ethics of the market place with its crass insensitivity to the voice of genuine humanity but the ethics of universal aspiration. The ethics of human solidarity" (pp. 115–116). Solidarity, which requires heightened consciousness, is in constant transaction in the liberatory education that Freire (2000) advocates to counter a traditional, mindless banking education. In Freirean education, students are in the process of becoming; they are unfinished, uncompleted beings, with unlimited potential. Teachers and students "become jointly responsible for the process in which all grow" (p. 61). Knowledge is "a medium evoking the critical reflection of both teacher and students" (p. 66) who are together focused on meaning and explanation. Learning is a problem-posing process, where collaborative partnerships evoke communication and dialogue, and meaning is constructed. Mindful pedagogies can open up the space where education can become authentic liberation, the process of humanizing, the praxis of learners empowered to transform their world.

We believe mindfulness is a criterion for empowerment and the praxis of human solidarity for the betterment of our democracy. For example, mindfulness practices such as meditation and yoga have had a peaceful collective and individual presence among several of the Occupy Wall Street movements of 2011. From our involvement in and witnessing of Occupy events, we have noted that protesters, who took to organizing according to a radically democratic, horizontal organizational structure, found mindfulness practice to be intuitively compatible with their mission of raising awareness of inequality and restoring power to the popular sovereignty of the citizen body. A central value in play within this democratic structure—which frustrated some observers of the movement in its heyday—is the respect for difference to the point of resisting coalescing a central message or establishing an authority hierarchy. Some may hold that this resistance eventually undermined the movement; regardless, this example demonstrates that mindfulness may sustain a moral-political philosophy. As one Yogi-activist, Hala Khouri, explained:

*As yogis we understand that our relationship with ourselves, our interior environment, affects the way we relate to our exterior environment. If you are cultivating compassion for yourself, you learn to extend it out to others. The more I have compassion for everyone involved in an issue, the more effective I'll be in communication with people I might disagree with. (Wroth, 2012, p. 30)*

Instead of initially rallying students against an organized oppressive external force or group, mindfulness practice, like Freirean critical pedagogy, seeks to identify and transform the oppressor within, the conditioning and unexamined biases that keep us from being fully aware of how we are complicit in maintaining inequitable structures, even those that constrain our own being and action. The struggle is against irresponsible and self-damaging behaviors and self-limiting or self-defeating beliefs. The emphasis is on taking care of the self, paying attention, being patient, and making incremental internal changes toward refinement. Once the internal self is strengthened, the external (social) self can direct its action.

Contrary to what some critics think, mindful nonattachment—non-grasping of things, outcomes, ideas, even people—is not numbness or indifference. Taking the perspective of the nonjudgmental internal witness, especially in moments of personal crisis, is part of biological, psychological, and spiritual survival. This is not selfish but self-directed. It is a strategy for replenishing energy that will always be radiating outward. With this approach, mindful practices have been found to develop compassion (Davidson, 2013; Davidson et al., 2012) and focus (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007), which makes practitioners more effective in their actions (David, Jacob, Alfred, & Marilyn, 2012).

Compassion moves us toward the relief of suffering, which is a Freirean social justice aim. Mindfulness programs are used to develop or deepen kindness and compassion toward all beings, including the self. This is a central purpose of mindfulness practice. The effects of the practice for many people might be a reduction in stress, an increase in attentional skills, and an improvement in

mood, sleep, and overall wellness. Any single person might adopt a mindfulness practice to improve herself or himself in some way, but that does not remove the purpose (end) or process (means) of the practice.

School-based mindfulness curricula, especially those in urban centers, do not ignore social conditions such as poverty, violence, and school failure, thus embracing Freirean praxis. Engaging in local social action is quite compatible with a personal mindfulness practice and is the norm among yoga and mindfulness organizations (see, as examples, Yoga Service Council, <http://yogaservicecouncil.org>; Off the Mat, <http://www.offthematintotheworld.org>; and Yoga for Youth, <http://www.yogafor youth.org>).

Social change requires working with others and is usually thought of some tangible, external action. Yet changing beliefs—a necessary requisite for social change against systemic injustice—requires work on the self. Understanding injustice involves cognitive, emotional, relational, embodied, and spiritual domains. These are the domains that are attended to in mindfulness practices, whereas even instructional practices that are democratic-dialogic can get caught up in being cognitive exercises, alone. Those of us involved in social justice education understand that information about injustice is not enough to create action toward change. Information itself does not change us until it becomes incorporated into our worldviews. But this requires a dismantling of tightly held beliefs about the universality of our own or our groups' experiences. And these beliefs operate like wheels in our heads, continually generating and repeating scripts about the way things are, as they have been handed to us from some socialization process, like education, and reified through public images and discourse (Orr, 2002). These scripts continue unless consciously examined and intentionally revised. Mindfulness practices are specifically suited to unlearning and relearning deeply held and emotionally charged beliefs.

Together, Dewey's and Freire's philosophies embody the reflective, contemplative, dialogical, and ethical pedagogy for which a democracy must strive. Dewey (1916) presented an argument for a democratic education that must always be under revision and unfinished, because of our ever-changing social world. Embracing the contribution of his educational philosophy, which holds that a democratic education must attend to the personal and the social, actually that the democratic individual is always a social being, corresponds to mindfulness practices and mindful pedagogies. Freire (1998) reminded us that we must remain conscious of our own conditioning and worldviews, as the socialization process of education always involves power. And power unchecked by our mindful attention can become oppressive even in a democracy. Also, without reflection to drive critical revision, any system of teaching and learning can be miseducative to the human spirit and detrimental to the solidarity our democratic experiment promotes.

### **Mindfully Democratic Schools**

Gilens and Page (2014) analyzed data of a long-term trend in legislative action in the United States that classifies the United States as an oligarchy, not a democracy. What does this mean for

public schools? Certainly, education policy and even to some degree public opinion around educational issues has been overwhelmingly influenced by what Saltman (2010) called "venture philanthropists," who have a pro-business vision for education. They are the oligarchs of the reform agenda, which includes standardization, test-based accountability, privatization, and competition. Where standardization is the goal, movement in the direction of democracy as a plurality of expression is understandably constrained.

We do not assume that public education and democratic education are equivalent. Far from it, democratic education aims at the democratic imaginary. The forms of democratic education will necessarily be multiple and each imperfect. Working within the current reform agenda does not mean that democratic education is impossible. Though it may be more difficult to enact complementary academic curricula, the civic mission of schools, being amorphous, can still be harnessed for progressive (Deweyan and Freirean) purposes (Hyde, 2011). Democratic education is not threatened by crisis or conflict but in fact requires it, takes nourishment from it (Burch, 2012). That the United States is not technically, functionally, a democracy says nothing about the democratic imaginary. Or if it does, it is an encouragement to continue to work on that unfinished project.

In the schools that we imagine, and in the ones that we describe, to a lesser extent, the arrangements and conditions of schooling become objects of contemplation. Teachers and staff consider how to find spaces of freedom to critically interpret what they are compelled or commanded to teach by the official curriculum. They work with students to embody free movement and free thought, along with self-knowledge and care for others as an inoculation or antidote to so much prescriptive knowledge and the narrow interpretation of its demonstration of mastery (testing). We see these actions as expressions of a mindfulness pedagogy.

### **Mindfulness Pedagogy**

We, along with colleague Knappen (Hyde & Knappen, 2011), developed a concept of mindfulness pedagogy, which includes mindful teaching, teaching mindfulness, and a mindfulness practice. It's an *embodied pedagogy*, as both feminists and phenomenologists use the term, and has as its purpose the integration of lived-experience among students and teachers and a "third thing" (Palmer, 1997, 115), which is studied. This is informed by integrative education (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010), integral education (Esbjörn-Hargens, Reams, & Gunnlaugson, 2010), and personally transformative education (Tennant, 2005). Here, our project is to connect mindfulness pedagogy to democratic education. We see mindfulness pedagogy as meeting the charge for teachers to be reflective of their teaching practice, focused on the experiences before them in the classroom, and open to growth and continual revision. For us, this has come to represent a pragmatic working through of Deweyan dialogic classrooms (Hyde, 2011) and Freirean critical pedagogy (Freire, 1994).

Mindful teaching is teaching that embodies the qualities of mindfulness. This involves attending to the present pedagogical moment, including the environment, the participants (teachers,

students, authors), and the content, as it is variously located in a swirl of interdisciplinary fields. This practice requires (self-) awareness and (self-) reflection, including an awareness of being situated in a vast barrage of overlapping contexts, from the geographic to the sociocultural.

In teaching mindfulness, the content of instruction, facilitation, or study is mindfulness. As those who are building the field of contemplative studies (Roth, 2006) would attest, the content can be highly structured and follow a specific tradition or a particular discipline, or it can involve sampling from a range of practices and/or creating group or individual practices. Teachers at all levels are familiar with contemplative techniques such as imagining and reflective journal writing, but meditative practices of body awareness and self exploration, specific attention training, and the development of self-awareness, compassion, and empathy could be especially necessary and beneficial in the current public school climate. Contemplative practices such as yoga help to shift some emphasis to internal experiences and help to reduce the stress associated with test preparation and the pressures of performance and competition associated with high-stakes accountability (Kruger, Wandle, & Struzziero, 2007).

Lastly, mindfulness pedagogy requires that the teacher engage in some kind of mindfulness (contemplative) practice—a range of practices that include reflection or receptivity, stillness of the mind and/or focused awareness and/or the movement arts (yoga, tai chi, qi gong). A mindfulness practice satisfies the need for personal transformation, so that Palmer's (1997) call to teachers to attend to "identity and integrity" and invest in practices of continuous renewal finds easy expression. The point is that unless you have some experience with a mindfulness practice, you will not be able to describe or demonstrate, let alone embody, such an experience for your students well. The value and focus of personal practice is in the process itself, not for any particular result. Still, for teachers, maintaining a personal mindfulness practice contributes to being more mindful in their teaching practice and in their relationships with their students. Research on mindfulness-based teacher training suggests "personal training in mindfulness skills can increase teachers' sense of well-being and teaching self-efficacy, as well as their ability to manage classroom behavior and establish and maintain supportive relationships with students" (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 292).

In the following section, we identify three schools, all part of the Coalition of Essential Schools (CES), which we believe create the space for mindfulness pedagogy. This is not to say that all of the teachers in the schools below have a mindfulness practice; we have not verified this in a systematic way. However, from our observations, many of the teachers seem to teach mindfully and certainly teach mindfulness practices. More important, the schools operate according to principles that are compatible with mindfulness pedagogy as we imagine it. Also, in describing the mindfully democratic practices of the Coalition of Essential Schools, we do not focus on the schools' efforts toward ensuring equity of educational treatment for poor and minority students, though all Coalition schools are, by their principles, working to include cultural and linguistic minority students. La Prad (2015) studied

multiple CES schools using bibliographic, historical, and empirical methods, while together (La Prad & Hyde, 2015), we developed case study research on the third school, IDEAS Academy. The descriptions of beliefs and practices that are occurring within the schools that we highlight are mere snapshots; they are far from exhaustive of their complete school programs, as the scope of this project is limited to a brief survey within one consortium of schools and for the purpose of introducing a novel concept.

### **The Coalition of Essential Schools**

Many schools may now embrace mindful practices. However when mindfulness is merged with democratic principles, where critical thinking, reflection, dialogue, individual freedoms, and social interaction with an aim toward equity are inherent parts of the school program, one educational reform organization distinguishes itself. The Coalition of Essential Schools provides a working and long-standing model of what we would call mindfully democratic schools.

Almost forty years ago, CES founder and educational historian, Theodore (Ted) Sizer (1932–2009) recognized that while schooling had changed since the turn of the 19th century, the basic ideas and many of its pedagogical practices remained stagnant. Sizer began a writing project that would span more than 15 years and produce an educational trilogy featuring Horace Smith, a fictitious high school teacher and educational reformer. Horace Smith is the archetypal Freirean teacher who sees that the teacher-student relationship must be dialogical. He is at the same time foundationally Deweyan in noting that this relationship cannot flourish within the confines of 19th century schooling. Further, Horace realizes that the unspoken agreement to work at minimum capacity, which includes the compromise that teachers and students will not question each other, will not ask more than the bare minimum of each other, cannot possibly sustain a democracy. In clarifying his vision of public schooling, Sizer (1996) said:

*What I personally care about is fostering thoughtful and decent young adults, people who have informed imagination and the restraint to use it wisely. I want them to be respectful skeptics, accused to asking "Why?" and being satisfied only with an answer that has as solid a base of evidence as possible. I care about how they use their minds, and all that they have learned, when no one is looking—that is, beyond any formal testing situation, in which they know that they are on the line. I care about their habits of mind. (pp. 76–77)*

CES, now 30 years old, maintains a mission to transform American public education so that every child, regardless of race or class, in every neighborhood attends a small, vibrant, intellectually challenging, and personalized school. These goals remain for CES schools even as other educational leaders have given up on a democratic mission in the face of the constraints and demands of test-based, accountability-driven reforms that are part of the current era.

In 2008, the CES journal, *Horace*, dedicated a special issue to wellness and the mind-body connection. The collection called out mindfulness and yoga practices in particular. The editor noted that

with this issue, CES has “determined that health in all of its forms must be at the center of a school community, that the health of individuals affects the health of the group, and that wellness transcends all disciplines and boundaries” (Davidson, 2008).

CES has remained a national leader in public education transformation and reform by sustaining a network of personalized, equitable, and intellectually challenging schools guided by Ten Common Principles<sup>1</sup> (CES, 2012). The three principles that are especially relevant to our concept of mindfully democratically schools are: learning to use one’s mind well, which Sizer said is the school’s central intellectual purpose; personalization of teaching and learning; and democracy and equity in policy, practices, and pedagogies. The reader should by now recognize that the habits of mind identified by Sizer are resonant with our reading of Dewey and Freire as well as with mindfulness as we have described it.

**Eagle Rock.** Eagle Rock is a unique, small, independent, and “value-driven” school located in Estes Park, Colorado. Eagle Rock has several videos on YouTube and Vimeo that illustrate such radically democratic features as student governance and judicial council. Eagle Rock embraces the CES Common Principles in its themes and expectations as it shapes a unique Ten Commitments that exemplify both democracy and mindfulness: live in respectful harmony with others; develop mind, body, and spirit; learn to communicate in speech and writing; serve the Eagle Rock and other communities; become a steward of the planet; make healthy personal choices; find, nurture, and develop the artist within; increase capacity to exercise leadership for justice; practice citizenship and democratic living; and devise an enduring moral and ethical code (Eagle Rock, 2012).

Eagle Rock facilitates these commitments with its unique year-round educational programming that “encourages student ownership of learning, demands documented or demonstrated mastery of graduation competencies (requirements) and allows for the individualization of credit toward graduation” (Eagle Rock, 2012). One commitment in particular speaks almost directly to mindfulness: develop mind, body, and spirit. Eagle Rock incorporates opportunities for students to meet the commitment both inside and outside the classroom with nutritious meals and exercise and recreation programming that includes yoga and seated meditation. Within the school’s academic curriculum, learning experiences (classes) are created and revised intentionally by the instructional team. Jennifer Morine (2008), an Eagle Rock instructional specialist, explained, “A major learning experience for many of our students has revolved around the realization that their physical well-being greatly affects their academic learning, both in the moment and in the long term” (para 2).

An example of Eagle Rock’s academic intentionality is seen in development and revision of one mind-body learning experience called Colorado Rocks, which integrates ecology, geography,

geology, physics, mathematics, physiology of rock climbing, and personal growth for students. Here, the physical activity of rock climbing helps not only to engage the students but also to situate them in a climbing environment to integrate mind and body learning at a deeper level. The experience is facilitated with a technique called “lens of change over time” which helps the students tie together everything that they are doing. Morine (2008) explained, “Through this conceptual lens, students are truly engaging their minds and their bodies as they study both the change in the external landscapes (geology, environmental issues) as well as their internal landscapes (personal growth and self-awareness)” (para. 7). Through Deweyan and Freirean activity, dialogue and reflective journaling, students are able to draw connections between changes in the physical landscape of the environment and in the the internal psychological landscape in their bodies. In the end, students are able to see the universal connections among their own experiences, the physical world, and the academic curriculum.

While Eagle Rock’s school program appears to align particularly well with the type of mindfully democratic school we envision, the Colorado Rocks learning experience reflects all three of the CES principles that we have highlighted. This experience requires students to use their minds well as they integrate science, mathematics, and kinesthetic learning. Personalization in learning occurs as students are engaged with self-awareness of environmental and personal conditions and decisions. Democracy and equity are in play as students engage with the environmental issues that place-based pedagogy promotes.

**Westminster Center School.** Westminster Center School (WCS) is a CES-affiliated public elementary school located in Westminster, Vermont. The mission of WCS is to “teach all children to become competent, caring citizens in a changing world through a challenging curriculum and supportive environment” (WCS, 2012). To be successful in meeting its mission, like many other CES schools, WCS adapts the CES Common Principles to meet its own community’s needs. In clarifying its vision, WCS holds eleven belief statements. For our purposes, two of WCS’s belief statements focus directly on mindfulness and democracy: “developing deep understandings, making connections, seeking knowledge of content, and practicing necessary skills will enable students to be self-directed in life” and “cultivating democratic practices and global citizenship” (WCS, 2012). To fulfill these belief statements, WCS practices what it calls the “idea of presence.” At WCS, being present means simply being in the moment—students, teachers, and staff being aware of what is unfolding for them and around them so that they are connected to their environment. Laura Thomas (2008), the director of the Antioch Center for School Renewal, which partners with WCS in developing mindful activities, explained this presence as “focusing fully on the person or task before you rather than multitasking, doing many things with partial, fractured attention and intention” (para. 2).

Being present is at the heart of all WCS learning experiences, and WCS teachers and students learn and practice many ways to achieve this presence, including mindful meditation and yoga. While WCS collaborates with Antioch University New England’s

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1 Learning to use one’s mind well; less is more: depth over coverage; goals apply to all students; personalization; student as worker, teacher as coach; demonstration of mastery; a tone of decency and trust; commitment to the entire school; resources dedicated to teaching and learning; democracy and equity

Education Department and Antioch Center for School Renewal to develop appropriate mindful activities and practices, WCS also benefits from having a guidance counselor who is a longtime practitioner of mindfulness meditation. WCS recognizes the benefits of these practices. Yoga poses help students slow down, calm, and focus themselves with structured, deliberate techniques. This gives students the confidence to express and control themselves in a confident, pro-social manner. Other poses, such as the warrior pose, can empower students and help build self-esteem. Postures that focus on strengthening assist students to recognize and believe that they are strong and that they can do what is asked of them in multiple contexts.

Thomas (2008) shared another mindful activity that WCS faculty engaged their students with, called the cookie ceremony. In this activity, students are given a cookie and asked to eat it as slowly as they can (for more on mindful eating, see Kabat-Zinn, 2005). “The goal is to be as aware as possible of the taste, texture, and experience of eating—to be fully present in the experience of eating the cookie” (para. 7). With this ceremony, students have the experience of focusing on only one task: truly experiencing the taste and texture of the cookie. Focusing their attention, they can then utilize their senses and develop descriptive and decision-making skills. WCS faculty believe that by building focusing skills, students are able not only to concentrate on academics but also to use these skills in sorting out complex social problems, where previously their emotions got in the way. “Through mindfulness practice, students learn to sort out their emotions, to regain control of their actions, and to resolve the problem” (para. 7). This practice of presence is a skill truly necessary for democratic citizenship. Presence is a requisite for Deweyan “democratic listening” (Garri-son, 1996), where participants need to have developed the skills for patience for, receptivity of, and openness to views different from, or even hostile to, their own.

We identify Westminster Center School as a mindful democratic school not only because its mission statement says it embraces caring citizenship by cultivating democratic practices but because its practices are also mindful. In the example of the cookie ceremony, students are learning to use their minds well. Personalization occurs as learning is situated in this experiential activity, and students develop the use of their own senses in support of the value judgments they are making. As staff have observed, these skills are transferable within and outside of the school environment.

**IDEAS Academy.** IDEAS Academy (Innovation through Design, Engineering, Arts, and Science) is a small CES public school in Sheboygan, Wisconsin. The IDEAS Program of Study (2012) states that the school embraces the CES Common Principles as a “guiding philosophy rather than a replicable model for schools” (p. 3). It further expounds that decades of research and practice in CES schools “reflect the wisdom of thousands of educators who are successfully engaged in creating personalized, equitable, and academically challenging schools for all young people” (p. 3). With this guiding philosophy, IDEAS employs alternative pedagogical methods and curriculum programs to be a viable democratic alternative to many of the educational practices found in schools

today. “Our equitable, student-centered, inquiry-driven culture supports a democratic community . . . in which students learn what it means to be part of a community and are prepared for global citizenship” (p. 12).

IDEAS’ culture exudes the reflective dialogue of democratic education and the focused nonjudgmental inquiry of mindfulness. IDEAS’ teachers and students use thinking routines, from Harvard’s Project Zero, that essentially become habits of mind—part of the intellectual culture of the school community. These routines, a collection of scripts and prompts, deliberately focus and structure critical thinking toward self and social development, taking perspective, and the adoption of multiple perspectives.

*When you walk into IDEAS . . . you see the culture. Thinking Routines<sup>2</sup> on neat plaques line the halls and the walls of every classroom: “Creative Question,” “The Ladder of Feedback,” “Generate, Sort, Connect, Elaborate, Concept Maps,” “Circle of Viewpoints.” Student work is everywhere: sculptures and block prints, camera angle studies and movie posters, scientific drawings of animal adaptations, sticky-note debates over political and nutrition issues, newly invented math language. (Hamm, Wentz, Robison, Woods, & Zielke, 2012, p. 133)*

A culture of thinking and interaction combined with the pedagogical philosophy of project-based learning shape this mindfully democratic school. IDEAS’ curriculum has requisite and elective arts components that include dance and yoga. IDEAS additionally employs a full-time movement instructor, while other staff, in classes such as drama and stage performance, emphasize the importance of the body in thinking, learning, and creativity.

Project-based learning is interwoven into the school’s curriculum. IDEAS’ Program of Study (2012) explains, “Students must have the ability to synthesize and to communicate effectively. These key skills are developed and mastered in student projects and presentations. Our student presentation process includes time for guided reflection and time to learn how to critique” (p. 5). The school’s intentional modified block scheduling allows for a daily hour-long Project Block. Here, students work on semester-length projects to “synthesize and see relationships in seemingly unrelated fields, see patterns beyond specific answers, and create something new by combining pieces others had not thought to pair” (p. 5). Students must utilize a creative medium or art form to present their findings, the answers to their questions, in the form of a public exhibition open to the community. During exhibitions, students must respond to questions about their projects and products and reflect on the process of their work.

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2 Thinking routines are tools to help students explore ideas around important topics. One may be a set of questions or a sequence of steps that students use to deepen their understanding of a topic, issue, or problem. IDEAS uses thinking routines to help make thinking visible to students and teachers to assist in improving and strengthening thinking. Thinking routines have been developed from the activities of Project Zero at the Harvard Graduate School of Education (*Visible Thinking Resource Book*, pp. 6–8).

This curriculum and pedagogical program is an application of learning to use one's mind as well as an example of mindful teaching and teaching mindfulness. Project-based learning at IDEAS involves all the steps in Dewey's (via Rogers's, 2002) procedures for thinking: presence, description, analysis and intelligent action and experimentation. In their Project Block period, students work together, alone, or in partnerships and with the advice of teacher-mentors to generate topics of interest from which a central question is shaped. Each student must investigate both what they know and what can be known about their topics. A crucial part of project-based learning is experiencing failure, which generates learning and habituates students to mindfully working through discomfort and difficult emotions (LaPrad & Hyde, 2015).

While we identify IDEAS as a mindfully democratic school because of the overall curriculum program, we identify project-based learning as a mindful practice itself. Not only do students learn to use their minds well in project-based learning, this learning is also personalized and democratic in its process and public exhibition.

## Conclusion

Within the contemporary discourse of school reform, philosophies of education can inform education policy toward supporting a democratic vision, but such contributions will often be counter narratives, as we acknowledge mindfulness pedagogy to be. One might think that in current, even mainstream, policy discourse, democracy is a system to safeguard freedom to compete in a race to some economic gain. Mindfully democratic schools, like the ones introduced above, are not arranged for such a purpose; they are principled around and aim toward a democratic human flourishing. Democracy, as we understand it, is composed of democratic modes of living within a plurality of socially constructed personal and institutional arrangements. It, therefore, requires an education that sustains a mindfully democratic philosophy and offers practice in participation. Mindfulness is a complementary and, perhaps, necessary component of democracy. Both require the same dispositions and actions. Both are self-directed, internally assessed, and always unfinished.

In our empirical work (Hyde, 2012; Hyde & Spence, 2013; La Prad, 2015; La Prad & Hyde, n.d.), neither one of us brought the concept of mindfully democratic to the schools or programs that we studied, but it will doubtless be a lens that we will use to reanalyze extant data as well as an influence on the direction of inquiry within current and future projects. And we encourage others to use, or use and adapt, this concept for their own research and scholarship. We anticipate sharing this concept with teachers and students as well as looking at social engagement as an outcome of mindfully democratic schools.

The intention of the present work is to be descriptive and speculatively hopeful in bringing together mindfulness, democracy, and education. We find that choice in the use and adaptation of mindfulness practices are paramount in creating mindfully democratic schools, as this flexibility is foundational to democratic schooling in the first place. In particular, mindful practices such as

attention to breath for self-regulation of states of mind or emotions and mindful movement, provided these both retain the root ethical position of compassion toward self and others, are well suited to creating habits of critical democratic citizenship. Roeser and Pinela (2014) have reminded us that school-based mindfulness programs must be made responsive to the developmental needs of youth. As Dewey was influenced by evolutionary theory and took revision toward continual social change as the necessary attitude of democratic systems, so should any mindfulness programs be open to both the diversity and dynamism of children and teens.

We recognize pluralistic possibilities, such as the Coalition of Essential Schools examples above. As we look over today's educational landscape, we see that many school-based and yoga-for-youth programs are involved in justice-oriented community action, beyond their initial mission to bring wellness, self-knowledge, and self-discipline to individuals, with an eye toward fostering peace in small communities and throughout the world. Hyde (2012) has argued for the connection between yoga and social justice and noted how yoga educators are partnering with K–12 teachers to use state and national standards for emancipatory ends.

Those who may be interested in starting mindfulness programs to support and enhance democratic principles could choose to initiate a partnership with any number of school-based mindfulness—predominantly meditation and yoga—service providers. Education professionals may now be aided by the growing number of their rank who are members of the new interdisciplinary field of mindfulness in education. Collaboration is welcome through the Mindfulness in Education Network and the International Association for School Yoga and Mindfulness. Those interested in mindful practices in the service of justice-oriented action may be interested in consulting with the members of the Yoga Service Council.

Schools and school districts on their own struggle with an impossible number of often competing priorities: those arising from their democratic missions and those handed down from the state. And schools are not solely, nor even primarily, the source for equalizing opportunities. Out-of-school factors (Berliner, 2006; Rothstein, 2009) account for far more of the differences in wealth, health, and life opportunities. The democratic imaginary and the production of democracy as a political system require much more than a focus on schools; however, as so many have argued, this great project must be intentionally practiced within schools.

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