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Interview with Oren Ergas on his book *Reconstructing 'Education' through Mindful Attention: Positioning the Mind at the Center of Curriculum and Pedagogy*

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K.V.: Mindfulness has been integrated into education for two decades now, with a steep rise in recent years. Most agree that it is a good thing, fostering health, academic achievement, and social-emotional skills. But few discuss it as not just a nice add-on to pedagogy as we know it, but rather as a fundamental change in how to conceptualize education—if we dare to look deeper. This is what you do in your book *Reconstructing 'Education' through Mindful Attention*. Why is mindfulness such a fundamental part of your theory of education?

O.E.: Yes, I indeed view the incorporation of mindfulness in education as a progression that is not merely about its salutary outcomes. Of course, enhancing mental and physical health and social-emotional skills is laudable, but what I see here is something deeper that emerges when looking at the practice itself. Mindfulness practice is about turning our attention *in* to our present moment embodied experience, and this entails at least three radical shifts that I articulate in the book as a “reconstruction of education.”

First, *you* are actually part of education: When looking at most of what goes on in schools, you'll find that it is based on sending

attention *out* to study the world. There is much merit in that, but if this is all we do, then we are forgetting that our lives are lived from within our bodies and minds. There are always two sides to the curriculum—the one presented by the teacher/lecturer, and the *inner curriculum*, which is the one that unfolds moment by moment and is experienced by the student as his or her embodied present-moment thoughts, sensations, and emotions (Chapter 4). It's a good idea to study math and history, but who we are, what makes us tick, how we can become the people we want to become—these seem to me to be far more essential to all of us. As I write in my book: There is no subject matter more important than *you*. When you turn your attention *in* through mindfulness, suddenly education is not only about the world out there, it's actually about who *you* are. This, of course, is not about advocating solipsism or narcissism, it is rather about the precedence of embodied existence over the subject matter that often gets center stage.

Second, *the present is as important as the future* (Chapter 4): School and academia give the impression that the future is more important than the present. First graders hope to become second graders, university students always want to be done with their future exams, and even lecturers constantly look forward to the end of the year. I call this “the insufficiency of now” (see also Ergas, 2019a). There's this constant rush/need to be somewhere else more “advanced,” in the future. Now, I'm not saying that we do not need goals and aims; part of life is finding what is meaningful to you and pursuing that. What I am saying is that we need an equal footing in the present moment. It's not because the present is always that nice. It's rather because it is the only place in which we actually live. Learning to be here in this moment is crucial for our well-being, for the appreciation of life, and for experiencing meaning in life. Practicing mindfulness is exactly this: It is letting go of future aims and goals and bringing attention to the present moment to appreciate the only experience that is fully real.

Third, *we need to learn to live with uncertainty*: Schools and universities tend to carry what I call in the book “the promise of education”; namely, this kind of certainty of knowing that if you

acquire skills and knowledge you will have control over your life and arrive at the “good” that education promises. We certainly need skills and knowledge, but let’s be more realistic; life is far more complex than that. We need to learn how to face uncertainty; how to bow to life when it doesn’t go our way. Mindfulness practice teaches you this because here you practice setting aside your ideas and wants, allowing experience to unfold on its own terms. You become a very humble student in such condition, one who sets aside the illusion that reality necessarily unfolds based on the patterns in which you often believe it should.

D.W.: In your book, you argue that the self of the learner is the necessary, unique, and irreducible ingredient of education, whereas all contents of education as selected by society (“curriculum”) are contingent and historical. Could you say more about that and how it relates to mindfulness?

O.E.: Broadly this is correct, but it needs clarification and unpacking. So first, I distinguish between what is contingent and what is non-contingent (Chapter 3). For me this is a starting point for thinking about education and the curriculum as representations of what society believes is necessary for living a good life. Our common starting point is to think first about curriculum as all those disciplines in schools, as if they pre-exist the embodied experience of the person. This is part of the metaphor I use for education—as a “pruning” of the mind. We make the subject matter into the epicenter of the educational experience and shape the mind to believe that God had created the curriculum in its current form on the eighth [day] of creation. Some people actually come to believe that you really need all that stuff that is taught in schools in order to live a good life. So again, I agree that there’s a need for basic skills and knowledge, but the disciplines we choose to teach (e.g., history, mathematics) are contingent; they are possibilities, not necessities; they could have been others (e.g., law, archeology). I see all of this the other way around: Subject matter is a gateway to unfolding the person who is the non-contingent element here. A curriculum that

focuses only on these disciplines simply doesn't touch the non-contingent essence of what it means to live life as a human being—living with a body, experiencing thoughts, sensations, emotions, making decisions, engaging with others, facing uncertainty, change, pain, suffering, joy.

If we get too caught up in believing that our biggest problem lies in lack of basic skill and disciplinary knowledge, all we need to do is look at the contemporary COVID-19 pandemic and the incredible racism around the world. Our problem is that many people are not taught to live within their own skin—their sensations, thoughts, emotions. We are missing the fact that the biggest curricular deliberation made does not concern the disciplines; it concerns where you orient attention in education—is it *in* or is it *out* (Chapter 5)? Do the former, you study the self; do the latter, you study the world. What we currently have is almost entirely the latter, which hides inner wisdom because attention is stuck outside. What we need is balance! That is achieved by wisely incorporating contemplative practices in education.

K.V.: Let me touch a related facet of this inward orientation: In your book you—surprisingly—talk of the mind as a “teacher” with a special “inner curriculum.” What does that mean?

O.E.: This has to do with what I refer to as the hugest curricular blind spot of education: We somehow do not realize that the chatter we hear in our minds throughout the day shapes who we are and how we act. This, in fact, comes from research that focuses on the brain's default mode network (DMN) (Chapter 8). This network is responsible for all that chatter that we experience in our minds when we do nothing in particular, engage in benign tasks such as driving, or when we're actually trying to focus and get bored and space out. Normal human beings spend something like 30 to 50 percent of the time listening to their own thoughts. When this applies to students we get fixed on the fact that they're “missing the lesson”; we haven't yet realized that they're not just missing something, they are “schooled in their own minds” (Ergas, 2018). Mind-wandering

has a substantial effect on our moods, decision making, behaviors, and sense of identity, and there is a lot of research coming from this field constantly bringing more nuance to it.

I take this a step further. I argue that every thought that you experience in your mind is like a subject matter that had emerged from your mind-as-teacher and had been attended to by your mind-as-student. The fact that your thoughts are not always wise does not deprive them of the power to shape who you are (for better or for worse). Contemplative practices not only clarify these ideas, they provide you with an ability to direct this *inner curriculum* with growing wisdom by learning to watch it as if from a distance. Sometimes it teaches you lessons from the gaps between the thoughts that no external curriculum will teach you.

K.V.: So following this idea of a curricular “blind spot,” in your book you show in great detail that “we don’t know *what* we don’t know” and that “we don’t know *that* we don’t know” as fundamental features of our mind. In your theory, this insight leads us to see education from a different angle, right?

O.E.: Both aphorisms begin with remembering the fundamental of attention I take from William James: “[F]or the moment what we attend to is reality” (James, 1890) (Chapter 2). Our day-to-day awareness is extremely limited and purposeful. It’s like holding a flashlight and seeing only what’s in the light, but that which remains in the dark is far greater in magnitude without your realizing it. There is an incredible illusion involved in this because *your* mind is the source of that flashlight; wherever you orient attention, there is light. This gives us a very primordial and constant illusion of omniscience (Chapter 3).

What I’m claiming is that egocentrism is built into the very primary nature of attention and perception. At any given moment we think we know what’s going on but we don’t, because it’s simply not captured by our senses, or if it is, most of it will not arrive at our conscious awareness. Just as you are reading right now, I bet you don’t have a sense of your right-hand pinky. It’s not that the pinky

doesn't exist but rather that it is not attended to for that moment. So now I just pointed to the lacking pinky in your experience, but you can imagine that there are an infinite number of other things that are not there at any given moment. They can't be, because your attention is limited. So there is a basic ignorance that accompanies our lives. That suggests that we are blind to much of what goes on.

But that's only the first part of the problem, because you might say, "Well, the pinky is not all that important at the moment, so I don't need to know about it." That might be true, but that's something you say now, when you reflect on the logic of your mind not bringing the pinky to your awareness; you're forgetting that when you think and act in real life, you don't do so having in mind such considerations. You are far more likely to act as if you know all there is to know about experience, which is part of what Tor Nørretranders (1991) calls "the user illusion." You don't know what you don't know, but you also don't know *that* you don't know—we are blind to our own blindness. The great paradox is that this not knowing of not knowing is a double negation that yields an affirmation—you end up thinking you know everything.

Now, to be sure, this is our *non-contemplative automatic pilot* mode of being. Being mindful means remembering our blindness and practicing humility in the face of our ignorance. So coming back to the end of the question you ask, now indeed we have another angle on education. We see why mindful attention is so crucial to it, and how examining experience from the perspective of the mind holds deep insights for curriculum and pedagogy. Simply put, if education is about knowing who we are, that also means knowing what makes us tick, how our experience is shaped by our own minds, and how deeply ingrained our ignorance is in relation to the world, and in relation to others around us. Education that introduces mindfulness becomes a journey toward emerging out of egocentrism in a very deep sense.

K.V.: In your work we find a differentiation between *ego* and *self*, which I mainly know from spiritual literature. But you explain it without any

spiritual presuppositions as a phenomenological obviousness that entails huge educational consequences.

O.E.: I wouldn't say I distinguish ego and self, but rather articulate various experiences of our identity that you can study through contemplative practices. Ego is one manifestation of the various identities that are available to us (Chapters 3, 8, 9). I see the word "spiritual" as a possible but not necessary description of these experiences. I am not committed to any specific spiritual tradition, only to the explorations that different traditions open for us through their worldviews and practice.

So to elaborate more on these identities, I distinguish between two modalities of "self," which I borrow from James's (1890) *I/me* distinction (which others like Antonio Damasio and Shaun Gallagher have also unpacked in other terms), and I also think of it in light of East Asian traditions. *I* is a core sense of selfhood that you can take in two different directions—it's either a separate self that is ever-present, if you will, along the lines of classical yoga's *purusha*, or a constantly changing entity that changes as experience changes, more in tune with the Buddha's *anatta*. *Me*, however, is a day-to-day sense of identity that is mostly formed in our minds through constant chatter. That's part of that mind-as-teacher mentioned above, but *me* is quite an ignorant teacher that brainwashes the mind-as-student. We listen to that chatter unreflectively and come up with a very limited idea of who we are.

Contemplative practices invoke two other identities (Chapters 8 & 9): the *reflective I* and the *contemplative I*. These are two very different identities that carry very different senses of agency. The *reflective I* is Cartesian. It's the "philosopher" who believes it is a *thinker*. With the exception of some Greco-Roman practices (Hadot, 1995), philosophy, as developed in the West as a language-based practice, tends to entangle us with the identity of "I think therefore I am," rather than "a thought emerges therefore a thought exists." That's why I view it as very limited if this is your only point of entry into understanding self and reality. By engaging *body*-based contemplative practices, such as mindfulness, yoga, or tai chi, a

contemplative I emerges as a more profound identity. It allows you to look critically at the reflective I and realize some of its limits.

I realize that for some who haven't practiced meditation, this might sound completely uncanny, but my experience is that for most people these experiences do not await too far away if they engage in practice. I've seen them emerge in some students and they have a very liberating effect.

Coming back to the *ego*—it is based in *me* and the *reflective I*, mostly (Chapter 8). It doesn't survive without words and language since it's nourished through thoughts about ourselves and the world. When you engage for a while in contemplative practice, *this* experience of the ego evaporates for periods of time. At some point you also learn to engage the *contemplative I* during your day-to-day and see through the ego.

Of course, all I suggest in the book are possible ways of seeing things, based on my own experience and my understanding. I'm sure that more advanced contemplatives than myself can articulate more. I only see these as pedagogical tools to be tested through practice.

K.V.: Moving toward closure, what would all that's been said here mean in a practical sense for teachers at schools and for teacher educators at universities?

O.E.: Yes, I think it's crucial to end with a grounded and practical orientation. The first thing I'd say is that there are a number of levels to this: teachers'/lecturers' personal mindfulness practice, students' practice, and the integration of mindfulness into the disciplines within *Contemplative Pedagogy* (cf. Ergas, 2019b).

So first, I think that teachers/lectures who wish to incorporate mindfulness in their teaching have to be grounded in a regular practice. However, in most parts of the world these people are extremely busy, and many have a very difficult time sustaining a daily practice. My suggestion then is that schools and universities find a way to incorporate the opportunity for practice into their daily routine.

I'm speaking of moving from an "interventions modality" to a whole school/campus approach. If we want more serious transformations to happen in the daily lives of students and teachers/students, we need to develop organizational mechanisms that cultivate this: if speaking about school, for example, having two breaks a day of 20 minutes for teachers' practice of mindfulness. They divide into two shifts with one shift practicing and the other remaining in charge. Furthermore, staff meetings can open with practice. This, by the way, is not a fantasy; I've seen it applied. Next, you have student practice—introducing one lesson a week that focuses on mindfulness practice in age-appropriate ways, in which the teachers practice along with the students. In addition, you introduce small breaks of five-minute mindfulness practices across the standard curriculum.

Finally, there is an infinite potential for teaching the actual subject matter across disciplines by applying principles of mindfulness practice to them. This is the field of contemplative pedagogy, which has so far mostly been considered in higher education (Barbezat & Bush, 2013), but there's no reason why it should remain only there. Consider that the greatest amount of time in school is spent learning disciplines and skills. If we find ways to teach at least some of this by applying contemplative practices, we would be expanding the possibilities here dramatically. For example, if you teach about the respiration system as a biology teacher, why not examine the breath experientially through mindfulness? If you teach about borders in geography, why not consider the concept of "border" by experiencing the border between your body and the air around you? If you teach geometry, consider some of the lovely exercises that Arthur Zajonc (2009) introduces in his book.

All of this is *reconstructing education through mindful attention*. You see, this is not just about mindfulness practice *per se*, it's about considering the real purpose of education and applying our faculty of attention not only toward studying the world *out there*, but also toward examining our embodied minds as we attend *in* and *from here*. The terrain of the self that awaits attention that is oriented *in*

is as infinite as the horizon of the world that awaits an attention that is oriented out. Whatever the case, there is no subject matter more important than the learner.

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