Mindfulness Education and New Ageism: Implications for democratic citizenship education

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Introduction

In this presentation we examine the political implications of the increasing influence of ‘mindfulness’ in education, particularly in public schools. Mindfulness is said to have originated in Buddhist thinking and meditation practice over two and a half thousand years ago. Its original purpose was to address and relieve self-induced suffering caused by the dysfunctional ways people habitually tend to respond to their experience. As we explain in more detail, contemporary versions of mindfulness in Western democratic societies are commonly associated with quasi-religious and personalist principles of the ‘New Age’ movement. Mindfulness practices typically associated with New Age ideals are now quite widespread in public schools.

Educational philosophy and research has been marked by a noticeable uptick in interest about the potential educational benefits of mindfulness\(^1\). Being somewhat sympathetic to the sorts of educational potential that philosophically nuanced understandings of mindfulness might have (for education conceived according to its moral or epistemic dimensions), our main goal is to highlight specific areas of concern that this scholarly literature has so far ignored. Ultimately, we argue that mindfulness practices emerge as a source of educational concern to the extent that they are embraced in schools without careful consideration of their political implications, especially in relationship with broader aims of education in liberal-democratic society. These concerns should be addressed more carefully if educational theorists and policy makers are inclined to support a constructive program of mindfulness in schools.

\(^1\) Foe examples, see the papers that comprise the Journal of Philosophy of Education special issue from May 2015: Philosophy East/West: Exploring Intersections between Educational and Contemplative Practices.
Mindfulness and ‘New Ageism’ in education

Our concern about the political dimensions of mindfulness practices in schools comes in part from its historical links a particular historical trend, namely the progressive penetration of a certain type of New Ageism in educational settings. By New Ageism, we mean a tendency to use the spiritual and personalist language brought by the New Age movement of the sixties and seventies to address specifically pedagogical issues, using a vocabulary such as ‘whole child development – freeing consciousness – developing full potential – personal transformation - etc.’

From an educational perspective, the potential problems with New Ageism are not related to the movement’s origins in various spiritual traditions; but more importantly to its massive commercialization. One only has to look at the products of this new thriving industry (self help books, leadership courses, yoga retreats, etc.) that use the New Age language and technique in order to help people actualize their individual selves. Such techniques are slowly entering our public schools most notably through mindfulness practices, yoga classes and even self-hypnosis\(^2\), and perhaps also more subtly through conflict resolution techniques such as magic circles, mimes or visualization, that are publicized in pedagogical booklets. Not surprisingly, marketing initiatives have emerged specifically designed to promote such activities and associated materials.

We are sensitive to the fact that the New Age language and techniques that are used in schools are meant to do only good. However, the narrow instrumentalization of these techniques in schools remains a cause for concern. By ‘instrumentalization’ we mean that New Age methods and curricular materials are increasingly being incorporated in educational setting as tools for addressing specific local and particular educational concerns (for e.g. bullying, performance anxiety); but support for such initiatives is largely detached from broader considerations for what it means to educate a human being and what responsibilities in entails in terms of fostering an understanding of oneself, and of ones social, political and economic roles as well.

In order to bring into sharper focus the particular features of the mindfulness trend about which we are most concerned, we first reconstruct a conception of what could be called ‘educational new ageism’, which draws on the work of scholars like Michel Lacroix and John G. Melton. We argue that this educational New Ageism presupposes, whether or not it posits, a worldview with

\(^2\) See Daily Mail 17 October, 2000, ‘Entranced exam; pupils offered classes in self-hypnosis to help them relax before exams’.
theological, anthropological and political elements that require a closer examination. However, in this paper, we more specifically examine the relative political vacancy that seems to characterize educational New Ageism and discuss its potentially detrimental consequences for democratic citizenship education.

What is educational ‘New Ageism’?

The New Age movement is an eclectic mix of various beliefs drawing on western esoterism as well as various elements of eastern spirituality. It became particularly popular in the West as the coming of the “New Age”, which was initially predicted for the Christmas of 1967, became eminent. Even if the apocalyptic event never took place, an international network of New Age groups with renewed beliefs emerged and expanded (Melton, 2014). One eminent figure, David Spangler, initiated the idea that the coming of a New Age was actually the believers’ responsibility: change had to come first from within. This growing spiritual movement was also very much intertwined with the growing popularity of humanistic psychology and the human potential movement, which also rested on a strong belief in the powers of the Self (Lacroix, 1996). Cults and movements of personal and social transformation soon became very popular in the sixties and seventies, at the coming of age of the baby boom generation, a “transcendentally hungry generation, ready for new ideas”, as Geoffrey Hill (1998) puts it. Far from being united or monolithic, these trends were eclectic and thus very hard to characterize. They went from the foundation of the Esalen institute\(^3\) in California to the internationalization of the Church of scientology or the creation of small communities in search of alternative ways of living.

What appears to unite the various branches of New Ageism, from one spectrum to the other, is a certain belief in the possibility for everyone to realize their “full potential”, to develop a more authentic form of life by exploring and being more in touch with one’s emotions and true inner Self. We identify this feature of new ageism as a Rogerian conception of personalism that has also proved very influential in American and Canadian schools since the 1970’s (Simard, 2005, Rogers, 1961). Another important dimension of new ageism is the strong reliance on various types of therapeutic techniques in order to help people in their actualization process (Lacroix,

\(^3\) For a history of the Esalen Institute, see Walter Truett Anderson, The Upstart Spring: Esalen and the American Awakening. Addison-Wesley, Reading, Mass, 1983.
As we mentioned earlier, there is increasing evidence that these techniques are entering schools more and more, whether through yoga, mindfulness, self-hypnosis, art therapy, and the like. Finally, there is also a certain entrepreneurial dimension to New Ageism in the sense that it strongly encourages people to take control and responsibility for who they are and who they ought to become, and that this very much entails being able to determine one's life goals and life projects, and being able to “make it happen” efficiently. This too is becoming an important dimension of contemporary schooling, as an increasingly important role of schools is to help students to “know themselves”, identify their talents, and choose their goals (see for example, Quebec, 2006).

Some concerns with educational New Ageism

The first concern comes from the overemphasis of educational New Ageism on the aim of personal growth, and from a corresponding underemphasis on the political dimensions of democratic education. At the roots of the New Age movement, there is the idea that reality is a holistic entity and that a coming era of peace and harmony will come through personal transformation, rather than through political engagement and collective action. This raises a number of educational worries about the political implications of new age practices such as mindfulness. While a holistic conception of the world would certainly encourage students to view the difficulties, conflicts and contradictions they encounter as personal challenges to be overcome through personal growth, it seems possible that it could also encourage a withdrawal from worldly political participation necessary to address concerns about civic inequality and injustice that ought to be central to democratic citizenship education.

Second, educational New Ageism embodies a certain form of emotivism in the sense that it does not rely primarily on the use and exploration of propositional arguments, but instead places special emphasis on the expression and control of individual emotions. New ageism is to a significant extent grounded in the idea that rational reflection - such as the ability to identify fallacious or inconsistent arguments, or to detect the misuse of evidence - constrains the mind, and undermines or displaces other ways of knowing, feeling and of being that are more authentic and more conducive to enlightenment. This anti-rationality dimension of New Ageism does not merely devalue reasoned reflection in general. Perhaps more importantly, it provides the basis for elevating the prestige and status forms of discourse that are vague, and of jargon and rhetoric that may seem deep or committed to those that have not been familiarized with basic tools of rational
criticism, but which in fact are often quite meaningless and ineffectual in addressing concerns about justice, political commitment, social awareness, etc., and that can easily lead to manipulative forms of persuasion.

Third, we discuss the entrepreneurial dimension of educational New Ageism. The educational concern we focus on here builds on the previous analysis of personal transformation/lack of political agency and emotivism/manipulation. We suggest that by focusing on the developments of personal talents and aspirations, educational new ageism may open the door to broader institutional forms of educational manipulation and depoliticization (MacIntyre, 1985). Here we link political and economic imperatives associated with human capital approaches to educational policy with new age ideals that seem to counsel withdrawal from real world politics and a corresponding emphasis on self-transformation and individual emotional discipline and expression. We suggest that educational New Ageism reinforces the neoliberal values of performance and efficiency, without offering any significant countervailing educational resources of critical reflection or agency.

Taken together, we argue, these three elements combine into an educational ideology that undermines the possibility to foster the dispositions for meaningful political commitment. Personal growth insists on the individual (spiritual, therapeutic) dimension of emancipatory transformation. At the same time, the emotivist and entrepreneurial Self diminishes the salience of ethical and political deliberation and elevates the educational significance of variable and arbitrary exigencies of personal preference and desire. Finally, and as a result, New Ageism seems to fail to provide tools necessary to resist extra-school forces that harness school practices to the interests of politically and economically powerful elites.

References