

Reflective Teaching

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Dancing in the Rain: Leading with Compassion, Vitality, and Mindfulness in Education

Murphy, Jerome T.

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Book Review

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Former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Jerome Murphy writes as a seasoned educator about how to best care for yourself as a teacher in the midst of daily stress. This book applies to the stress of academia as well as ministry. It is a book I would recommend to students preparing to teach and to serve in ministerial vocations. Murphy highlights the source of stress that afflicts educators: our own responses to stress. When difficult situations arise, we tend to respond in one of three self-defeating ways: ruminating on the negative, rebuking ourselves, or resisting our emotions. Murphy draws from the literature on mindfulness to point out the health benefits of becoming aware of our emotions in the moment and accepting our shortcomings.

As an alternative to the cycles of rumination, rebuke, and resistance, Murphy offers a list of instructions that help educators focus on their own values, summarized by the acronym "MY DANCE." Each letter represents a phrase discussed in the following chapters. "Minding your values" advocates understanding our own life goals and naming our best version of ourselves. Knowing who we want to be helps us evaluate whether our actions are in line with our values. The next chapter, "Yield to now," captures the importance of in-the-moment mindfulness, trying to stay present to ourselves and others, and includes exercises for practicing mindfulness. "Disentangle from upsets" also highlights the role of mindfulness in preventing us from being consumed by our stress. The chapter titled "Allow unease" instructs readers to attend to the discomfort of negative feelings. "Nourish yourself" emphasizes intentional self-care and practices of gratitude, while "Cherish self-compassion" takes self-care to a deeper level. The last element of the acronym is "Express Feelings Wisely."

In each of these chapters, Murphy brings in personal anecdotes from years of administration and leading workshops for teachers and school principals. He intersperses these lessons with some of his own personal struggles, such as his wife's diagnosis with Alzheimer's disease. In these glimpses of personal sharing, the reader gets a sense of how these practices of self-care have been imperative for someone who has transitioned from being a dean of a Harvard graduate school to a full-time caregiver for his wife of nearly fifty years as she slowly loses her ability to recognize him.

This book draws our attention to the humanity of all educators: we are not simply vessels of information or mediums of higher learning. Each person has his or her own struggles in living daily life, on top of the demands of our teaching vocations. Attending lovingly to our limitations and caring for ourselves in the midst of these struggles is crucial if we are to be effective as teachers and healthy individuals. I recommend this book to anyone who wants to learn how to better care for themselves in the midst of life's demands.

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