The Invisible Classroom: Relationships, Neuroscience and Mindfulness in School

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The invisible classroom: Relationships, neuroscience, & mindfulness in school by Olson, K.

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Book Review


*The Invisible Classroom: Relationships, Neuroscience, & Mindfulness in School* is an accessible and engaging text written for those who work in the school system. At the heart of the book lies Dr. Kirke Olson’s assertion that there are two interrelated forces at play in every classroom, and those are the visible and invisible classrooms. He describes the visible classroom as the space focused on the standardized and measured elements of education, primarily instructors imparting information on students and students demonstrating comprehension and mastery of that information. The invisible classroom on the other hand consists of what exists beyond competencies and test scores, specifically the interpersonal connections within the classroom, including the behavioral, emotional, and relational elements that create the contextual environment in which learning occurs.

Grounding the text in theories and findings from neuroscience and the subfield of interpersonal neurobiology, Dr. Olson provides a compelling and thoughtful argument that these two spaces are highly interrelated. He argues that students’ overly prioritized performance in the visible classroom is highly influenced by the interpersonal connections at play in the often ignored invisible classroom. He contends that it is up to all parties involved in the school system, including administrators, faculty, staff, parents, and students, to create a school culture that is attentive and responsive to the behavioral, emotional, and relational elements that influence the teaching and learning environment. Dr. Olson further contends that the best way to do so is through the application of strengths-based approaches to relationship building with students and parents and the implementation of mindfulness practice in the school system, and more specifically the classroom.

The book is divided into eight chapters. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the key principles guiding the text and their role in learning. These principles include neuroscience and interpersonal neurobiology, relationships and the importance of relating to students in ways that engage and foster their strengths, and the implementation of mindfulness practice, that Dr. Olson says, brings nonjudgmental attention to the present in the
classroom. The next six chapters of the book expand on these key principles and include discussions on the roles of classroom safety, attachment theory, attention, and memory in teaching and learning.

In each of these chapters, Dr. Olson presents an engaging theoretical discussion of the principles, provides empirical support for their role in teaching and learning, and then deftly places the principles in the context of the classroom with examples from his nearly 40 years of experience as a school psychologist. Each of the chapters close with a section titled Tools for School, which are practical sets of tools for school personnel that focus on bringing the principles into the classroom and the larger school system. In the final chapter of the book, Dr. Olson ties all of the principles together through a brief but thoughtful discussion that makes their interconnectedness explicit, particularly as they relate to the development of classroom culture.

A major strength of the text is Dr. Olson’s ability to present complex scientific theory and evidence in a straightforward and simplified manner. For example, in chapter two he reviews the work of Dan Siegel and his work in the field of interpersonal neurobiology. Dr. Olson does so to explore the role of safety in schools and to provide theoretical and empirical support for the important role safety plays in classroom teaching and learning. He argues that students and educators must feel safe from harm in order for effective and impactful teaching and learning to occur. Another example of Dr. Olson’s ability to present complex information is in his review of attachment theory in chapter three. He provides a succinct overview of the basic tenets of attachment theory, discusses the role they play in neurological development, and provides examples of how students’ secure and insecure attachment styles, as well as educators’ ways of responding to students’ attachment styles, impact classroom teaching and learning. As someone who attends to the relational elements of the classroom through small group experiences and discussions, it is refreshing to see Dr. Olson provide empirical support for “beginning with relationships and then moving to curriculum” as the most “efficient way to ensure our students’ success” (p.55).

An additional strength of the text is Dr. Olson’s attention to putting theory and evidence into practice through the Tools for School sections in Chapters 2 through 7. These tools offer school personnel strengths-based and mindfully oriented approaches to helping students work through behavioral, emotional, and relational issues that are hampering their ability to succeed in the classroom. Examples of these tools include providing students with disconfirming experiences that challenge their expectations of teaching and learning (e.g., demanding that students make mistakes during class to support their understanding that all learning involves mistakes), seeking student input on what is working in the classroom (e.g., ending each class session by asking students to verbalize or write down what worked in class today), and bringing mindfulness practices into the classroom (e.g., making time for deep breathing at the beginning of class to bring them into the present moment.
and space). One of the more striking elements of the book is Dr. Olson’s invitation to school personnel to consider implementing mindfulness practices throughout the school system (e.g., faculty and administrative meetings, all school assemblies, etc.) to create a culture of mindfulness within schools.

Although Dr. Olson never explicitly addresses the role of groups or group workers in school settings, the book does provide the readership of this journal with a unique opportunity to reflect upon the parallels between the classroom environment, group work, and their respective dynamics and processes. As a social work with groups educator and researcher, I am often struck by how the classroom and those who inhabit it feel like a group. Yet I often feel limited by the constraints and demands of what Dr. Olson insightfully refers to as the visible classroom. What lingers with me after reading and reviewing the text is Dr. Olson’s charge to engage the invisible classroom using tools that are not all that unfamiliar to me as a group worker. The text serves as an invitation to bring our skills as group workers into classrooms and school systems to create better teaching and learning environments.

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