



Discussion Guide

In the Small Places: Stories of Teacher Changemakers and the Power of Human Agency

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General and Chapter Questions

Mednick asserts that teachers aren't necessarily born or made but show up. What do you think he means by this? Do you agree? Disagree?

What do you think Mednick intended with his first chapter, "Addled Child?"

Mednick was inspired by teachers who responded to his question, "What do you see outside your window?" In thinking about the state of the world's education, what do you see? What don't you see? What would you like to see?

Mednick's friendship with Jane Goodall is powerful. What does she represent to you?

The chapter about Jihad El-Sana tells us something about cross-border relationships. What does it mean to you? What does the name of Mednick's organization, Teachers Without Borders, mean to you?

The chapter featuring Deepmala Khera is titled, "Shall We Stay the Same?" In reflecting on education in your country these days, what stays the same? What has changed?

"In the Small Places" is a reflection that begins with photographs of a world far from Mednick's childhood experience, and yet stimulated him to engage with—rather than learn about—the world. Has an image ever stirred you to act? Could images hold that much power?

"My Favorite Dictator" discusses Mednick's interactions with former Pakistani president, Pervez Musharraf. What was Mednick's intention in this chapter?

“No Fear” and “Forklift Humanitarian” tell stories of (1) an activist working on behalf of girls’ education (Sameena) and (2) a forklift driver (name unknown) who found himself being of service to people in need thousands of miles away. What do these chapters say about human agency?

The “Bulls and Mosquitoes” chapter describes the work of Solmaz Mohadjer and the connection between earthquake science and safety. How can we educate to integrate science and safety when teachers are so pressured to meet the demands of their curriculum?

“Bulls and Mosquitoes,” “A Country Under Water,” “Time is not on our Side,” and “Peace on the Radio” do not hold back in their descriptions of the need for education to address local, national, and global challenges. The first two could be considered “natural” disasters and the second two “national” disasters. But is that a proper distinction? Though we cannot prevent earthquakes or floods, are natural and national connected? Where do national and international responsibilities intersect?

Chapter 16, “How Could This Happen Again,” is posed as a question and may harken back to Chapter 5: “Shall We Stay the Same?” What are the parallels? What are the distinctions between the two contexts?

“I Want to Meet the King of America” is the story of an Afghan girl, “Vasila Hussein.” Mednick describes how easy it is to use one story to discuss a bigger picture, but equally easy for those stories to be exploitative. Where do you stand? Is it unfair to point one child out as an example? Or is it necessary?

“Multiple Intelligences in Kabul” paints the non-formally educated teacher in a very positive light. What is Mednick trying to say here? Is this a comment about teaching against the odds? The power of human agency? An indictment of formal education? The education of teachers regardless of formal or non-formal structure? Today, education in Afghanistan is dangerous. What are your thoughts about the role of teachers in what is widely considered a “failed” state? What should you/we do about it?

In “Noblesse Oblige, the Cologne of Colonists,” Mednick addresses the challenges of working as an NGO in an environment where money talks and where NGO leaders must make tough choices about what is negotiable and what is non-negotiable. What are your thoughts about such dilemmas? When should we compromise and when do we reach the point where what we believe and do is compromised?

“El Mundo es un Pano de Mano: The World is a Handkerchief” describes the work of Deya Castilleja in Mexico. What does the handkerchief represent?

In “Quick Quiz: What is Suriname?” Mednick describes education in a country few people could place on a map of the world. It could very well be “one of those small places.” Why, then, does he focus on the top tier (Minister of Education, Marie Levens) as well as the bottom-up? What is he saying about the process of social change?

“So I Will Walk Toward Them” focuses on one of Mednick’s graduate students, Simbarashe (Simba) Manyike, and his effort to draw attention to education in emergencies and people uprooted from Ukraine. What messages does Simba want the world to know?

In Mednick’s final chapter, “Progress Report: The World’s Fair or a Fair World?” Mednick reflects on the world his father inhabited for over a century and continues the thread to from “How Could This Happen Again?” and “Shall We Stay the Same?” As the book comes to an end, what are your reflections about the nature of progress?

Themes

Education in Emergencies

What emergency education story stuck with you the most? Why?

Professionals define three phases of education in (and for) emergencies: (1) before—preparation and planning (2) during—intervention in a crisis, and (3) after—reconstruction. Thinking about that same disaster, what phase interests you the most? Why?

If you are interested in the *prevention and planning* phase, you may recall the saying: “An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure.” Think of a current disaster. How would you have either prevented it or implemented a plan to mitigate against creating even greater trauma? Consider this: given several countries’ poor infrastructure and capacity, an “ounce of prevention” might be easier said than done. Again, focusing on that same disaster, how would you create, sustain, and measure a prevention and planning program? What will you need to know? How would you find out that information?

If you are interested in the *intervention* phase, what is your justification for providing education in the midst of a humanitarian crisis, given all the other immediate needs facing rescue and relief efforts? What types of interventions might be included? Think about all the references to disasters in the book. In any of those stories, what might have been missing? What might have been done more effectively? In a similar crisis not in the book, what should have been done? Can intervention connect to prevention and planning?

In the *reconstruction* phase, what does education in emergencies offer? Identify a particular disaster within the last five years. Should the community: (a) replicate its education system? (b) reform it? (c) create a new one entirely? What are both the positive and negative consequences of taking such an approach? What would need to change? How might you imagine that change coming about?

Identify an emergency that transcends national borders. How might the world address the three phases?

For researchers: what is changing in the field and who are the key players in the field today? Where are the continuing gaps in the field?”

Educating Girls

A majority of the teacher leaders in this book are women. Which one stood out? Why? What do we currently know about the education of girls? What do we not?

What is the state of girls' education today, and is there cause for concern?

What impact does violence against women have on the lives of women and girls?

What strategies have increased and enhanced girls' educational opportunities?

How can educational systems promote equality more successfully?

What can teachers do to ensure a high-quality education for girls?

What changes in politics and the law are necessary to improve the education of girls?

Peace and Human Rights

What is the connection between peace and human rights?

What is your definition of peace education? Is it realistic? Can it be taught? If so, how can peace education be incorporated into classrooms?

What modifications does our society need to make in order for peace education to make a difference? How might societal reform result from personal change?

How can communities or schools establish a culture of peace?

How can we foster peace in all spheres of society, from the individual to the global?

What fundamental tenets govern human rights education?

Disarmament and disarmament education: what are they?