

Mindfulness in Schools - A Tentative Welcome

Introduction:

I welcome the Department of Education's new wellbeing initiative for students and teachers. As a mindfulness practitioner, teacher and teacher trainer, I particularly welcome the inclusion of mindfulness as part of this initiative. There is now a huge amount of research in the adult field and a growing body of evidence in the area of child and adolescent psychology regarding the benefits of mindfulness (Burke, C., 2010; Harnett, P.S. and Dawe, S., 2012). Just as with adults, the development of mindfulness has many potential benefits for children and young people: it can assist them in developing self-awareness and emotional and psychological maturity and resilience, a greater capacity for concentration, better sleep and overall health, and it can help in reducing anxiety and low mood.

This happens because developing mindfulness helps us:

- To become familiar with the workings of our mind, including the ways we may either try to avoid or else become completely consumed by difficulties;
- To notice when we are getting caught in old habits of mind that re-activate downward mood spirals or ratchet up anxiety levels;
- To explore ways of releasing ourselves from those old habits and different ways of relating to challenges;
- To notice small beauties and pleasures in the world around us instead of living in our heads;
- To be kinder to ourselves instead of wishing things were different all the time, or driving ourselves to meet impossible goals;
- To accept ourselves as we are, rather than getting caught up in harsh self-criticism and self-judgement.

One of the interesting things is that in accepting ourselves as we are and in noticing either how hard we strive or maybe how we sometimes give up very easily, we actually do better at most tasks, because we see more clearly what needs to happen and we are more focused and less likely to become overwhelmed.

Mindfulness involves being present in the moment and responding to whatever arises with an attitude of compassion. So teaching mindfulness operates on these two levels: 1. teaching children and young people to be more aware of what is going on in them and around them *as is happening* and 2. teaching them to approach their own experience and that of others in a kinder way.

This deliberate cultivation of attitudes of kindness, consideration and care can be a challenge, but with the understanding that kindness is attitudinal rather than emotional, and therefore can be a choice we make rather than a feeling we have, most people, including the young people in our care, will choose the kind option. Many teachers who have implemented mindfulness into their classrooms notice a significant decrease in student behaviour referrals with a corresponding increase in academic engagement.

One of the ways that mindfulness achieves these results is that it helps us to create a space between our thoughts and our actions. Poor impulse control is what lands many of our students in trouble. When they can learn to pause, to insert a gap before taking action, students gradually develop their capacity to be a little more reflective and a little less than

reactive. This allows them to engage more fully with the task in hand, and to take their lives a little less personally and a little more seriously! Mindfulness helps us all to wake up to our lives as they are unfolding in each moment, not at some point in the future, but right now.

Just as with adults, students find that mindfulness gives them a greater sense of freedom. When they discover that they no longer need to act on every thought racing through their minds the sense of personal agency arising from this greater self awareness is deeply empowering. At the end of a 7-week course in mindfulness I taught in a Dublin Community School a 1st year boy with ADHD reported that the 3rd year boys who always slag him were 'stunned' when he didn't react to their slagging. "I never realised I had a choice," he said. "I always felt like I *had to* get mad and shout at them. This time I realised I didn't have to do that any more and they couldn't *make* me angry, it was up to me, and it felt great."

14 schools in Baltimore, USA have engaged the services of The Holistic Life Foundation (<http://hlfinc.org/>) to embed mindfulness training and practices into school life, including as part of the detention programme. One of their schools, the Coleman School, now uses mindfulness programs instead of detention and has witnessed dramatic results: for over two years, the rate of suspensions at the school has plummeted. (<http://www.upworthy.com/this-school-replaced-detention-with-meditation-the-results-are-stunning>).

In developing more positive attitudes towards themselves, students are less dependent on measuring their performance against others in order to feel good or bad about themselves and they are more able to acknowledge their own effort in attempting work. This is very good news for Learning Support teachers. We often see our students' self-esteem plummet, particularly as they get older and begin to compare themselves unfavourably with other students who may not have the level of difficulty they have. Seeing themselves and each other more compassionately leads to greater co-operation and less competition, freeing them up to do their best with less anxiety about outcome.

Professor Katherine Weare says of the neuroscience "these changes are not all in the imagination of the meditator. Brain imaging studies on adults are showing that mindfulness meditation reliably and profoundly alters the structure and function of the brain to improve the quality of both thought and feeling (April 2012).

Mindfulness is a muscle and so it requires exercising. How it is viewed in the school from the top down and the bottom up is very important. It must be seen as a valuable tool in enabling both staff and young people to flourish, to experience agency in their lives, to learn to speak more honestly, and to listen carefully and respectfully to others. When seen and valued in this way it can only benefit our whole school communities enormously. If it is seen as just another item to be forced into an already packed curriculum it is unlikely to be effective, as students and teachers will be much less likely to practice it and then they will miss its life-changing benefits.

Precisely because of the results of the research it is important to manage expectations. Mindfulness is not a placebo and is not necessarily right for everyone at every time. Some people, adults and children, may not be in the right place to receive mindfulness training. In any properly run mindfulness course there is an orientation process to determine that this is the right course and the right time for each potential participant to engage in mindfulness training. For example, a person in the grip of severe depression may easily be overwhelmed by the demands of sitting still with his or her own experience, in silence. So whoever is

teaching the programme needs to allow children to opt out and the school needs to be able to provide alternative activities for them. It is useful if there can be at least two adults in the room, the one teaching mindfulness and another who can support those who don't wish to be engaged in mindfulness training.

I teach in a post primary school and I offer short mindfulness practices to many of my Learning Support students. Most of them take to it very easily and they really seem to 'get' it, but for one or two the invitation to come to the body can be too much. The body is not always a safe place and if a child has been sexually abused, for example, maybe that's the last place they can feel safe and grounded. I teach one boy who has already been introduced to mindfulness in a non-school context and he is convinced that he hates mindfulness. I do not try to persuade him otherwise. I am hopeful that some of what the rest of us are doing is sinking in and that he doesn't have to be seen to be participating to benefit. While I am teaching the other children some mindfulness approaches to manage their anxiety levels, I ensure that he has a book to read or other work of an enjoyable nature to do, as it is important that he doesn't feel that he is being punished for opting out of mindfulness.

Mindfulness is sometimes seen as merely a technique for improving concentration, or for helping children and teenagers to relax, and this is to do it a disservice. Mindfulness is about helping us to be with our experience in a different way. Many of the teenagers I work with are highly stressed – by exams, by school, by family situations, they may have difficulties with friends or with girlfriends, they may be experiencing doubts about their sexuality and so on. If they identify with only a small part of their capacity they can get stuck in a place of feeling worthless, or helpless. This can lead to high levels of anxiety and sometimes depression.

How wonderful for young people to be given mindfulness as an instrument for developing self-awareness, self-knowledge and the space and capacity to express what they are learning about themselves. How wonderful to realise that we have a far greater capacity than we may think, or than has been modelled to us by our elders, our parents and our teachers. Because of course stressed teachers and parents teach young people to be good at being stressed! While a certain amount of stress is good – without it we couldn't get out of bed in the morning, study, sit an exam, balance a budget, plan a holiday etc. – it is the perception that this situation is more than we can handle that overwhelms us. Mindfulness can really help to puncture this sense of overwhelm and connect in with and build on the resources we already have for managing whatever life throws at us.

Dr. Jill Suttie in Mindful magazine (March 2017) says: "... teacher stress is not only a problem for teachers; it can also be a problem for students. Stressed teachers impact students' stress levels through a contagion effect, and since student stress impacts learning, this can hurt the quality of education in the classroom. Students learn better in a climate that is more emotionally positive and less stressful, and past studies have shown a clear link between positive emotional classroom climates and academic achievement." (Hamre and Pianta September/October 2005).

Put on your own oxygen mask first:

Jamie Bristow, Director of The Mindfulness Initiative <https://www.mindful.org/author/jamie-bristow/> states:

“If teachers are to guide practices for children, it’s very important that they embody mindfulness themselves and have high levels of personal motivation. This takes time and effort. Mindfulness training cannot be delivered from a script, much like you wouldn’t ask a teacher who can’t swim to teach a swimming class from a textbook.”

Teachers need first to develop their own daily practice of mindfulness and to experience the benefits of mindfulness in their own lives, and not just in the classroom. The best way for teachers to begin this process is to participate in an 8-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) course, the ‘gold standard’ in the modern mindfulness movement. Developed by Dr Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in 1979, this course was initially designed for clinical populations (<http://www.umassmed.edu/cfm/>). Over the last 38 years it has been adapted for use with different populations – those with addictions (Mindfulness-Based Relapse Prevention), with prisoners, for cancer sufferers, people with OCD, psoriasis sufferers, for people with recurrent depression (Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy), for those with Generalised Anxiety Disorder, and in its original form, MBSR, with the general public, to help them deal with the ordinary stresses and strains of everyday life.

Over the last 20 years or so it has been adapted in various ways for use with children and young people, at home and in school. People like Susan Kaiser-Greenland (<http://www.susankaisergreenland.com>), Dr. Amy Salzman (www.stillquietplace.com), the MindUp programme, which is the brainchild of Goldie Hawn’s Foundation (<https://mindup.org/thehawnfoundation/>), the Mindfulness in Schools Project in the UK, which has developed the dot B and Paws B programmes for post primary and primary students, and the Bibo programme currently being developed here in Ireland. Bibo stands for ‘Breathe in, breathe out’ (<https://www.bibo.life/>).

Steps for Introducing Mindfulness in School

In April’s ‘Mindful’ magazine Jamie Bristow suggests the following steps, to which I have added my own observations in square brackets [] and italics:

1. First find a local qualified mindfulness teacher to hold a taster session for teachers and staff, so that they can get a sense for what it’s all about.

[I suggest including all staff here, including administration staff, Special Needs Assistants, caretakers etc.. The Board of Management should be invited. It is essential to link with the HSCL Teacher and hold an information & taster session for parents too. Buy-in from parents, who are major stakeholders in the school, is vital.]

2. Then, for those who are interested, we’d suggest providing an eight-week course for teachers derived from MBSR or MBCT or another evidence-based programme.

[This could be provided in school, immediately after school on one evening a week for 8 weeks. MBSR/MBCT are the gold standard in Mindfulness-Based courses. They are of 8 week’s duration, 2-2 ½ hours per week, with an additional full day’s practice between weeks 5 and 7. The course should be run by a properly trained mindfulness teacher with a long-standing personal practice. See the Good Practice Guidelines for Mindfulness Teachers, at <http://www.mindfulnessnetworkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Irish-Teacher-Guidelines-April-20-2015-1-1-1.pdf>]

3. Once a cohort of teachers has taken a mindfulness course themselves, support them to continue with personal practice by organizing half an hour once a week for sitting together – and/or provide access to apps and other support materials.

[I suggest that part of 1-2 lunch hours a week would be designated 'mindful lunchtimes' and taken in a separate room. The self-selected staff group could eat their lunch mindfully in silence together and follow it with a sitting practice. Having 2 lunchtimes would facilitate those who may be on lunchtime supervision one day allowing them to join their colleagues on the second day.]

4. Then, if they are inspired to do so, they could undertake teacher training, to learn how to introduce mindfulness to children. Most mindfulness teacher training programs require a minimum of six months [*some require two years*] of dedicated daily practice.

[There is nothing to stop teachers who have a genuine mindfulness practice themselves sharing aspects of mindfulness with their students without teacher training. But to truly honour the work and to ensure that participants benefit it is important that teachers receive teacher training before introducing mindfulness programmes to the classroom.]

Training staff has many benefits in its own right, and research is currently taking place into the impact of teachers' own mindfulness practice on general teaching quality.

Then teachers need to weave mindfulness into the existing curriculum. Finding ways to bring mindfulness into the curriculum means to teach in a mindful way. A lot of the mindfulness programmes that are being taught at the moment are being delivered by outsiders who parachute into the school and then disappear again. That's ok for now but it's not sustainable in the long term. The best way to teach children mindfulness is to demonstrate it ourselves, by embodying it. If we relate to the children and young people in our care in non-reactive, truthful and kind ways, they will learn to do the same far more effectively than by being taught *about* those ways of relating.

Whole-School Approach:

A school mindfulness programme needs to be supported and championed by senior staff, ideally the Principal and Deputy Principal, and if possible the Board of Management. If only one person is behind it, it will collapse when they leave or run out of steam. A half-hearted implementation will be ineffective. Schools can make a joint decision to become more mindful and create some special environments, for example a prayer room can double as a 'quiet' room, to support the students in undertaking formal practice.

In the UK the Wellcome Trust is investing £8million into researching mindfulness in schools. One of their early findings is that mindfulness in schools is less effective when it happens in fits and starts and is not consistent. It works best when it is taken on by the whole school community; where a sizeable number of staff participates in an 8-week MBSR course; where a significant group of teachers undertakes proper teacher training; where a system of 'mentoring' is set up, perhaps utilizing an outside mindfulness 'consultant' to support the staff; and where the whole school moves towards becoming a more mindful school community.

Of course, as in every walk of life, there will be those among the staff for whom mindfulness has little resonance and that has to be ok. People cannot be forced to embrace something which has little meaning for them. However, it is important that those people who cannot completely come on board would agree to supporting the efforts of their colleagues, as best they can. It is also important that the evidence that has been gathered is shared with all staff. For many years our education system has placed the emphasis on amassing knowledge of the outside world. What mindfulness offers us is the opportunity to gain knowledge of our internal worlds and of how we relate to our own experience and how we relate with others.

The capacity to develop emotional and psychological resilience, openness and curiosity about ourselves and our experience, empathy with others, self-awareness and the ability to focus are innate to all of us as human beings. We may have spent a great deal of our lives practicing NOT coping very well, and mindfulness challenges us to begin practicing a different way of being, which is to live in a way which allows us more freedom and space, more choice and, ultimately, more happiness. These capacities are increasingly believed to be just as important to our human development as knowledge about how that world works. The psychologist Daniel Goleman, for instance, is a great exponent of research (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=b9yRmpcXKjY>) showing that self-regulation capabilities are the biggest single determinant of life outcomes. Surely these are the skills and tools that we need to be offering to our students to help them navigate the world successfully and happily.

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Mindfulness for children and young people:

The Mindful Child - Susan Kaiser Greenland

A Still Quiet Place - Amy Saltzman

A Mindfulness Based Approach to Working with High Risk Adolescents - Sam Himmelstein

And any of the following by Dr Christopher Willard:

- *Growing Up Mindful* (Sounds True, 2016) Co-Author, with Mitch Abblett
- *The Mindfulness and Teen Depression Workbook* (New Harbinger, 2015)
- *Teaching Mindfulness Skills to Kids and Teens* Co-editor, with Amy Saltzman, (Guilford Press, 2015)
- *Mindfulness for Teen Anxiety Workbook* (New Harbinger, 2014)
- *Child's Mind* (Parallax Press, 2010)

For more general reading on mindfulness I recommend the following books:

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