

3. Mindfulness as a Pastoral Care Strategy in a Special School Context

By

Kay Murphy, BA, HDE, MA in Leadership and Pastoral Care

Introduction:

Students with Mild General Learning Disability (MGLD) are similar to their peers and generally do not have distinguishing physical features. The pilot study of mindfulness took place in an urban special school. The mindfulness programme was presented to a mixed gender group of adolescents with MGLD.

Pupils with mild general learning disabilities, have significantly below-average general intellectual functioning, associated with impairment in adaptive behavior. This may be reflected in a slow rate of maturation, reduced learning capacity and inadequate social adjustment.

(Special Education Review Committee, 1993)

The research question asked what pastoral needs can be met through the introduction of a mindfulness programme in the special school context. Schools do not and cannot only focus on the academic parts of the student. Instead an effort to focus on the whole person is a central philosophy of a caring school which seeks to value difference and uniqueness in its students and staff members. Students arrive daily bringing some of their needs and wants from outside school into the classroom. By adopting a pastoral lens the interrelatedness of all the parts that make us human- social, emotional, cognitive, spiritual and physical comes into focus and it was in this pastoral mode that the programme of mindfulness was embedded into the curriculum.

The Origins of Mindfulness

Historically the practice of mindfulness has been around for a long time and as such it is nothing new. Hart's paper on *Opening the Contemplative Mind in the Classroom* (2004) classifies the following as the collective wisdom traditions; meditation in Buddhism, yoga from the Hindu tradition, contemplative prayer in Christianity, radical questioning as expressed by Plato, metaphysical reflection of the Sufi tradition and deep pondering in the Jewish Kabbalah. These, he contends are these practices which cultivate contemplation in the pursuit of knowledge. Hart argues that this contemplative way of knowing is the gap in contemporary education as policy makers almost exclusively focus on rational-empirical modes of knowledge. Hart acknowledges that young children in particular are innate contemplatives but the constant stimulation of everyday living means that as children grow into adults they move away from their inner world and this leads to an imbalance. The three "R"s of reading, writing and arithmetic are commonly known as the bedrock of education while Siegel identifies the fourth "R", reflection, as an inner type of knowing. Siegel in *The Mindful Brain* (2007) combines his research on mindfulness with neuroscience.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a state of contemplation that allows one to connect to the present moment. It is in this opened state that one can be truly present to their inner self. One would suggest that being in a state of doing is our predominant mode of operating while we tend to ignore and place less emphasis on our inner landscape. It is essential that as humans we connect with the wider world and foster healthy relationships with others. By being mindful we can become more aware of our connectedness.

It is difficult to pin mindfulness down to one distinct definition so a number of definitions will be offered.

- The definition of mindfulness provided by Nyanaponika is “the clear and single-minded awareness of what actually happens to us and in us at the successive moments of perception” (Nyanapoika, 1972, p.5).
- while Thich Nhat Hanh defines mindfulness as “as keeping one’s consciousness alive to the present reality” (Hahn, 1976, p.11).
- Jon Kabat-Zinn’s definition is frequently quoted “Mindfulness is awareness, cultivated by paying attention in a sustained and particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgementally” (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, p.1).
- Ruth Baer adapts Kabat-Zinn’s definition for use in therapeutic and secular contexts; “intentionally focusing one’s attention on the experience occurring at the present moment in a non-judgemental or accepting way” (2006).

My working definition of mindfulness is to become aware of our present thoughts, feelings and body in a calm and caring way. Mindfulness then is like an inner awareness and way of knowing.

What Mindfulness is not.

Mindfulness is not about trying to improve or change things, rather “The challenge of mindfulness is to be present for your experience *as it is*” (Kabat-Zinn, 2012, P. 26).

Mindfulness is not a state of consciousness that allows one to relax so that one can fall asleep. While acknowledging one may fall asleep once relaxed this is not the intended outcome. Being mindful then is maintaining an awareness of what is happening right now in this present moment so insights can be sought.

It is not a form of meditation although meditation may be used as a tool to guide a person into a mindful way of being. Sr. Stan, in the foreword of the Sanctuary’s book *I Can Feel my Toes Breathe*, 2010, contends that a “good meditation practice is one that develops awareness or mindfulness of our body and our senses, of our mind, our heart and our soul”. In Christian meditation a mantra such as Maranatha (pronounced Mar-a-na-tha) may be used while the mind and the heart is opened to God. Focusing on the breath is a commonly used method of anchoring awareness to the present moment in many of the spiritual traditions.

Mindfulness in the Christian and Buddhist traditions is associated with wisdom and Gunaratana calls this awareness a “clear, direct, wordless knowing of what is and what is not, of what is correct and what is incorrect, of what we are doing and how we should go about doing it”.

Mindfulness is not used as a way to avoid difficulties or by-pass personality problems although it can be a creative way to become aware of one’s anxiety and stresses in today’s world. Research traditionally focused on mindfulness with adult populations leaving a gap in literature on mindfulness with children as the focus.

Mindfulness in Education

Mindfulness draws on numerous wisdom traditions, east and west, while classrooms in every educational setting naturally comprises of people of differing faiths, backgrounds and cultures. Mindfulness when offered in a non-denominational manner in school prompts students to draw on their own religious, spiritual and cultural experiences and these experiences make for a very valuable and inclusive discussion. Mindfulness practices can be offered in a variety of ways – as a calming technique at regular intervals throughout the school day or integrated into curricular subjects such as religious education; language and communication skills; art and social, personal and health education (SPHE). Mindfulness can be used at the beginning of the week for whole school assembly or it can be timetabled as a regular practice. The key here is that each school must adapt the programme to suit their school climate and age group so flexibility and teacher judgement come into play. Feldman has this to say when interviewed by Burnett (2009); “Even in schools there are different contexts.....The whole art here is about our flexibility in what we’re teaching and responsiveness to settings”. An aspect of good teaching is that it is needs led and the teacher is guided by the needs of the pupils in their care and respond accordingly.

An increasing number of schools in the U.S.A., Canada and the U.K are currently offering mindfulness programmes. The Hawn Foundation's programme called MindUp helps children learn mindfulness and scientific research into this programme has shown that improvements in attention, enhanced relationships and better stress management are evident.

Susan Kaiser Greenland, author of *The Mindful Child* and co-founder of Inner Kids develops mindfulness programmes for children, teachers, parents, health professionals and therapists. She focuses on the training of awareness as a way of looking at the inner and outer experiences of children and describes mindfulness awareness as paying attention to life experiences in a compassionate way. Kaiser Greenland introduced the new ABC's of learning; Attention, Balance and Compassion. She cautions those of us working with children and adolescences wisely as she contends "mindfulness is not a magic wand" and some children will dislike it.

In the U.K. the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning commonly known as the SEAL programme is a national government strategy and Burnett (2009) notes that "as a discipline, mindfulness dovetails very neatly" with the government's focus on children's emotional and health problems.

Burnett projects that mindfulness-based techniques will in the future be part of the "welfare tools" employed by those in the caring professions. The Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP) in the U.K. aims to encourage, support and research the teaching of secular mindfulness in schools. As a result of the .b programme (pronounced dot b) thousands of children in the UK are learning about mindfulness in their classrooms. One of the main differences of mindfulness in schools and out of school contexts is that of free choice; the school population do not choose to attend the mindfulness programme once it becomes part of the curriculum. In essence, the student population is a conscript audience being offered mindfulness in working classrooms of tables and plastic chairs, where interruptions are likely and disruptions possible (Burnett, 2009).

Mindfulness in a Special Education Setting

"From the perspective of a student's educational needs, mental health is one of *the* most significant barriers to learning" (Coughlan, 2011, p. 69).

Many pupils in today's society suffer from anxiety and Special Educational Needs (SEN) pupils are no different in this respect. It is estimated by The Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS, 2009-2010) that one in ten children and adolescence suffer from mental health disorders. Pupils with social, emotional and/or behavioural difficulties (SEBD) can experience difficulties which include depression, eating disorders, neurosis, childhood psychosis, attention deficit disorder/ ADHD and oppositional defiant disorder (ODD).

Mindfulness in schools relies on asking students to tune into their own feelings. Helping students to become aware of their feelings in a detached way can be developed through mindfulness practice. Over time students can choose to relate in new ways to their emotional world.

CATCH A MOMENT (CAM) – The Pilot Mindfulness Programme

The CAM Programme is taught through power point, brainstorming, instruction, activity and reflection. The programme is informed by Kabat-Zinn's Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and the Social and Personal Health Education curriculum as outlined by the Department of Education and Skills (DES).

Each lesson includes:

- Transition time. A focus on breathing in an effort to slow down and become present.
- A relaxation technique to help the body to become more grounded.
- A mindful skill, added gradually – students are increasingly guided to focus awareness and attention.
- A closing ritual – this is a gentle reminder to open their eyes if they chose to close them during the session.
- A time for reflection, at times leading to class discussion.

Access to a wide range of learning experiences is built into the programme to allow for the diversity of learning styles and needs in the classroom. Reinforcement remains constant and prompts such as verbal, visual and musical are added to assist the students in their individual learning styles. Charts and vocabulary are made in conjunction with the students to consolidate learning in the area of mindfulness and well-being. Students learn that the brain is like a muscle and that they can actively practise new ways of responding to everyday situations.

Conclusion

A research journal recording the voices of the students was kept for each classroom session. In addition the Warwick Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS) which measures a wide concept of well-being was administered prior and post delivery of the Mindfulness programme.

Analysis from this study indicate that mindfulness was successful in helping students to

1. feel relaxed,
2. think clearly,
3. deal with problems well and
4. show interest in other people.

Inter-personal skills including critical-thinking, being more attentive and being more emphatic were found. A heightened awareness of the need for pastoral programmes, such as mindfulness, for staff also emerged.

Mindfulness when presented in a structure manner can support students with MGLD as necessary life skills, self-esteem and personal qualities are fostered.

List of Abbreviations

ADHD:	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
ASD:	Autistic Spectrum Disorder
CAMHS:	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
DES:	Department of Education and Skills
EBD:	Emotional Behavioural Disorder
IQ:	Intelligence Quotient
MBCT:	Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy
MBSR:	Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction
MGLD:	Mild General Learning Disability
MiSP:	Mindfulness in Schools Project
ODD:	Oppositional Defiant Disorder
SEAL:	Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning for Secondary school
SEBD:	Social, Emotional Behavioural Difficulties
SEN:	Special Education Needs
SERC:	Special Education Review Committee
SPHE:	Social, Personal and Health Education
WEMWBS:	Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale

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