

BE PRESENT

I have just finished teaching an eight week mindfulness course to a group of 16 year olds and am struck by the richness of learning, communicating and bonding that has taken place. The teacher pupil relationship has been strengthened. We have shared much, in mindful ways, over the past number of weeks. The class teacher and SNA have truly encouraged and inspired me as they have added their own wisdom and creativity to the programme. They have also given credence to this new initiative as they too immersed themselves in the mindfulness lessons.

Mindfulness is often described as 'being present' and as I reflect I realise that being present is the greatest gift I can offer as a teacher. On any given session of the mindfulness course I offered in school I had to be present to individuals and at times to the class as a whole. I am reminded of one of the earlier sessions when the class teacher came to my resource room indicating that the planned mindfulness lesson for that afternoon could prove difficult as a number of incidents had occurred earlier that day, leaving a heavy mood of agitation. On that occasion I veered from my lesson plan opting to offer students a full relaxation meditation. The class embraced this suggestion and many of them took mats and blankets while others stayed seated at their desks. This lying down meditation is a version of the 'body scan' for those of you familiar with the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) programme or the aptly named 'beditation' from the .b Programme (pronounced dot b).

Lessons

My actual mindfulness lessons, like many other lessons, often take a different path despite my planning. Outlined is today's example, a lesson I had planned well as I

wanted to bring closure to our mindfulness sessions. Perhaps you

are familiar with the unwilling pupil, the one who opts out and tries to take the others with him/her. I met this pupil on the way into class today and so the battle began; the teacher versus the pupil. He didn't want to be there and he wanted us to disappear. However, instead of being swept away by the pupil and his non compliance I was able to acknowledge his difficulties yet be present to the whole class. This is what I call my informal mindful practice.

I took the decision to drop into stillness and quietness at the beginning; allowing more time for the mindful activity. During the shortened meditation, the class were able to choose to look after themselves or to be distracted by the low level noise of the aforementioned pupil. I was surprised as the pupils assumed their postures and reminded one another to place both feet on the floor. One of the girls who had been a reluctant participant in session one and two reminded her peers to place their hands on their laps as she shut her eyes to embrace this time for herself. Being aware of transformation as it happens is truly spectacular. This is the only feedback I need and gathering comments is unnecessary.

Wellbeing

As a teacher I have actively sought to nourish my pupils and their needs through my reading, attendance at courses and the application of the SPHE curriculum. However I have been lazy when it comes to looking after me. The question of my own wellbeing was slowly rising to the surface. I finally had to ask myself what was I doing to sustain myself, how could I reduce my own levels of stress and prevent the well documented burnout that exists within my profession.

While acknowledging I had accumulated a number of resources and strategies over the years I decided to try mindfulness, a

concept I knew little about. Initially I dipped into mindful-

ness without realising that I would return to it again and again and again. I was a bit annoyed when I realised mindfulness was not a quick fix but involved home practice, code for homework. It eventually dawned on me that mindfulness is not a once off course or just a good idea; it is a way of living that helps me be a better teacher. Armed with this knowledge I continue to struggle with my homework and have trained as a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction teacher.

On 'Mindful Mondays' I practice with my colleagues before the pupils arrive. Those of us who come together give ourselves this gift of time – a time to transition from our weekend to our working week. In turn I am more aware and better able to deal with stressful events as they are happening. I now acknowledge the emotional intensity of the job, an admission I could not have previously made due to my continued passion for teaching and learning. I pay more attention to my pupils and colleagues and am less likely to judge. I use mindfulness techniques with pupils in an effort to deliberately cultivate positive qualities such as empathy and compassion.

Finally a level of self-compassion is creeping in as I consciously try not to give emotionally charged school situations too much space in my head. Daily challenges will always exist but how I relate to the bumps in the road has changed. I realise that all teachers face challenges and that everyone, including myself, is doing the best we can in a system which offers little support in addressing teacher stress and promoting wellbeing.

"Be the educator who brings the experiences of kindness, care, joy, happiness and calm to the fore by your presence".

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system for over 25 years.

If you would like to try mindfulness as a buffer from stressful experiences Kay will be offering an eight week MBSR course geared for educators in the Friary on Merchants Quay, beginning January 2014. For further course information email: adkmurphy@gmail.com.