



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

School of Education

Te Kura Toi Tangata

Waikato Journal of Education

Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato



Volume 21, Issue 1, 2016

Waikato Journal of Education Te Hautaka Mātauranga o Waikato

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The Wilf Malcolm Institute of Educational Research (WMIER), which is part of the Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato, publishes the journal.

There are two major submission deadline dates: December 1 (for publication the following year in May); June 1 (for publication in the same year in November). Please submit your article or abstract on the website <http://wje.org.nz/index.php/WJE>.

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Publisher: Faculty of Education, The University of Waikato
Cover design: Donn Ratana
ISSN: 2382-0373

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Connection of a different kind: Teachers teaching mindfulness with children

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Abstract

Mindfulness programs are being used with increased frequency in schools, hospitals, clinics and community settings around the world. Research in school populations has predominately focused on assessing how the practice impacts students, using outcomes-based study designs. In the current study the author explored how experienced mindfulness instructors made sense of teaching children mindfulness, with a focus on exploring, understanding and interpreting the teacher's experiences. The methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis was employed to interview eight teachers teaching mindfulness with children from the United States and Australia. A number of themes emerged from the interviews; one being that spirituality plays an integral role in a teacher's mindfulness practice. Implications for future research, practice and policy are discussed.

Keywords

Mindfulness; meditation; mindfulness meditation; mindfulness education; wellness

Introduction

Since the new millennium, MindBody Wellness (MBW) practices have moved from the margins to the mainstream in schools (Todd & Ergas, 2015) around the world (Albrecht, 2014). Recent statistics from the United Kingdom indicates that nearly 50 percent of school-age children now engage in MBW activities during classroom time (Stone, 2014). Although in its infancy, the field of Mindbody Wellness is vast and is the most popular field of research in complementary medicine (Rotan & Ospina-Kammerer, 2007). MindBody Wellness (MBW) focuses on the interactions among the brain, mind, body and behaviour and the powerful ways in which emotional, mental, social, spiritual and behavioural factors can directly affect wellness (Albrecht, 2015). A number of practices fall under the wing of MBW and they include modalities that are ancient in origin to those more recently developed. For example: relaxation techniques such as progressive muscle relaxation; meditation (including mindfulness meditation); mindfulness practices (e.g., mindful eating; mindful listening); guided imagery; cognitive-behavioural therapy; psycho-educational approaches; *qigong*; humour and laughter; intuitive healing and expressive writing (Astin, Shapiro, Eisenber, & Forsys, 2003; Rotan & Ospina-Kammerer, 2007).



Mindfulness and meditation are the two most researched MBW practices (Rotan & Ospina-Kammerer, 2007) and the nature of this research varies markedly. Meditation research commenced during the 1930s and by the close of 2011, there were over 5,908 conference proceedings and journal articles on the topic from a range of disciplines, with yearly research output doubling since 2003 (Davanger, 2013). Research exploring the phenomena of mindfulness has grown exponentially over the last four decades. At the close of the 1980s, 13 studies had been published on the topic (Black, 2013), however, by 2012, the number of peer-reviewed articles in the field had swelled to around 2,500 (Ager, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2015; Albrecht, 2015). Up until 2011, the majority of this research focussed on understanding the efficacy of the practice in adult populations, with researchers predominately employing outcomes-basedⁱ trial designs (Albrecht, 2015; Hayes & Shenk, 2006). However, by the end of 2014, the prevalence of research focussed on children and school systems had dramatically altered, with approximately 36 percent of original mindfulness studies (approximately 100 peer-reviewed articles) conducted with school students and teachers (Albrecht, 2015).

With the rapid rate of publication in this area, there is also a growing trend to use qualitative forms of assessment to understand the area (Albrecht, 2015), as it is thought that outcomes-based research designs are unable to come to grips with the complexity, intricacies and nuances that mindfulness and meditation presents (Hayes & Shenk, 2006). It is posited that an excessive technological focus combined with a purely outcomes-based research program can produce misleading findings and lead to a less progressive science (Hayes & Shenk, 2006). In order to comprehend the impact of an intervention, such as meditation or mindfulness, Verhoef and Vanderheyden (2007) argue that we need to recognize that the creation of knowledge is continuous and evolutionary, requiring the employment of a variety of research methods. Prominent mindfulness researchers, Roeser, Skinner, Beers, and Jennings (2012) further suggest a critical need to explore the area in depth, with a focus on “phenomena finding” explorations that use rich ethnographic descriptions, case studies of exemplars and other forms of qualitative assessment. In the current article I report on findings from an in-depth qualitative study where I listened to the wisdom of teachers teaching mindfulness with children. The research question posed was, “How do teachers who are experienced MindBody Wellness practitioners make sense of teaching children mindfulness?” Before outlining the findings, I discuss mindfulness, school-based mindfulness programs, mindfulness research and the epistemology, methodology and methods that guided this exploratory study.

Mindfulness programs in schools

The term, “mindfulness” is most commonly used by researchers and practitioners to describe the medley of MBW practices that are rapidly being introduced in classrooms around the world. It is estimated that there are now over 30 different mindfulness programs for children (Albrecht, 2015). Some programs are free and web-basedⁱⁱ, others have face-to-face workshops and a number of providers offer hard-copy texts on the topic. The majority of programs have been developed over the last decade in the United States, translated into a number of languages and disseminated in China, Hong Kong, European nations, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, India and Thailand (Albrecht, 2015). In a text analysis of mindfulness programs for children, significant differences were found in the types of activities presented (Albrecht, 2015). Snel, author of *Sitting Still Like a Frog: Mindfulness Exercises for Kids* writes, “The specific applications of this learning are seemingly boundless” (2013, p. x). However, a key ingredient of all programs is that they are designed to cultivate *mindfulness*.

What is mindfulness? “Mindfulness involves an elemental and spontaneous openness to experience, grounded in the body, in the timeless, in not expecting anything to happen, a befriending and inhabiting of the present moment for its own sake” (Stahl & Goldstein (2010, p. x). Definitions of the concept are numerous and have been debated for centuries, however, in my personal opinion, a 10-minute Ted Talk by mindfulness and meditation expert, Andy Puddicombeⁱⁱⁱ gives an excellent insight into the nature of the concept. New Zealand educator and mindfulness researcher, Bernay (2012)

ⁱ Interpreted to mean single endpoints with a linear cause and effect link to an external intervention today (Paterson, Baarts, Launsø, & Verhoef, 2009).

ⁱⁱ See <http://smilingmind.com.au/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See https://www.ted.com/talks/andy_puddicombe_all_it_takes_is_10_mindful_minutes?language=en

further writes that mindfulness aligns with the philosophy and principles of Indigenous cultures. For example, he believes that mindfulness aligns with key Māori concepts of *Ata*, namely:

- *Ata-haere*—to be intentional and approach reflectively;
- *Ata-whakarongo*—to listen with reflective deliberation;
- *Ata-noho*—to give quality time to be with people and their issues;
- *Ata whakaaro*—to think with deliberation, considering possibilities and
- *Ata-korero*—to speak and communicate with clarity (Pohatu, 2000, as cited in, Bernay (2012, p. 23).

Mindfulness is often practised, formally, through meditation^{iv}, but may also be cultivated, informally, by paying attention to one's every day activities, such as eating, gardening or studying (Albrecht, 2014; Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012). The concept is applied to all types of awareness—auditory, gustatory, tactile and visual (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005, p. 100), as well as one's thoughts and emotions.

From my experience working and researching in the field, I have found that teachers may create their own activities, based on their own personal MindBody Wellness practice, follow one program in its entirety or teach lessons from a range of programs. For example, a mindfulness program developed by Costello and Lawler (2014) for Dublin schools students aged from 11 to 12 years, used a range of texts to sequentially build mindfulness skills over a five-week period. In the first week children were asked to pay attention to their breath, learning and rediscovering breathing in from the abdomen, rather than the chest. In the same week they also practised body awareness, mindful listening and paying attention to their thoughts and feelings. In week two, students moved on to study muscle relaxation and undertook a body scan meditation. Week three offered a chance to blow bubbles, let go of thoughts and feelings as well as taking time to appreciate the wonder of our inner personal wisdom. In the fourth week the primary school students learnt how to breathe for relaxation and focussed on how to be confident. The last week offered students the opportunity to practise guided imagery, environmental mindfulness, loving kindness and talking to one's guardian angel.

Mindfulness research with teachers

Teachers' experiences of teaching children mindfulness have only recently been studied and analysed within the context of academic literature. Initially researchers predominately investigated the efficacy of programs with children, finding they had wide ranging wellness benefits (Burke, 2010). We currently know very little about what is a best-practice approach to child-centric mindfulness instruction, how the practice aligns with educational policies and statements or how experienced and novice practitioners/teachers are teaching children mindfulness. McCown, Reibel, and Micozzi, (2011, p. 27) note that the dominant outcomes-based mentality, considered to be the "gold standard" in research has led to the assumption "that the ingredients of an intervention are significantly more important than the person delivering the ingredients".

However, since 2012, more attention has been paid to understanding the impacts of mindfulness in respect to the person delivering the ingredients. Researchers have predominately focused on investigating how the practice affects teachers new to learning mindfulness techniques (Kwon, 2015). Studies using both quantitative and qualitative methodologies show that a mindfulness practice has wide ranging wellness enhancing effects (Kwon, 2015; Weare, 2014) and is critical in maintaining teacher wellbeing (Kwon, 2015). A regular practice has been found to: reduce self-reported and objective measurements of stress (Albrecht et al., 2012; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013); decrease emotional exhaustion (Flook et al., 2013); heighten feelings of self-compassion (Flook et al., 2013); help teachers cultivate compassion for others (Kwon, 2015); assist with creating positive learning environments (Burrows, 2011a; Jean-Baptise, 2014; Kaltwasser, Sauer, & Kohls, 2014); raise teacher self-esteem (Albrecht et al., 2012); help with the development of preventative behaviour management strategies (Albrecht et al., 2012; Kwon, 2015) and classroom organizational

^{iv} Experience at <http://marc.ucla.edu/body.cfm?id=22&oTopID=22>

skills (Flook et al., 2013) and enhance relationships with parents (Kwon, 2015) and students (Jean-Baptise, 2014).

Epistemology and methodology

To understand more about how experienced MBW practitioners make sense of teaching children mindfulness, to learn from the wisdom of experience, I utilised a whole systems relational enquiry approach (Albrecht, 2015). This way of knowing and researching is transdisciplinary and acknowledges the multi-dimensional, dynamic and emergent nature of human health and wellbeing (Picard, Sabiston, & McNamara, 2011). It gives credence to a plurality of perspectives, acknowledges that knowledge is co-created and that the moment or the “now” is considered to be the most helpful point for meaning making (Burrows, 2011b). This epistemological stance enabled and encouraged a deep level of connection with some of the participants and helped me to uncover the essence of teachers’ experiences. It additionally allowed me to remain true to my values and research with people rather than to people (Burrows, 2011b).

When searching for an appropriate methodology to contemplate how teachers makes sense of teaching children mindfulness I located an approach that: matched my values, ethics and preferred ways of gathering wisdom; was rigorous; has the potential to resonate with a readership audience from a range of disciplines and additionally allowed me the room to explore mindfulness in depth and holistically. The methodology I chose was Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). It is an experiential qualitative approach to research and is concerned with experience-based knowledge. The methodology assists researchers to provide a detailed examination of personal lived experience, the meaning of that experience to participants and how they make sense of that experience in particular contexts (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

Method

Participants

There is a range of strategies associated with sampling in qualitative research (Flick, 2014). When using IPA, researchers sample purposively, with the aim to recruit participants who have a common experience that they personally consider to be momentous—an event or life experience of significance and meaning. Participants in the current study shared the common characteristics of being experienced MindBody Wellness practitioners and teaching children mindfulness in school and out-of-school settings. During 2014, eight teachers (1 male and 7 females) participated in the study. Participants were aged from 25 to 59 years. Seven participants were born in Australia and one in Germany. Teachers predominately answered that their cultural background was Australian. One teacher resided in New York, with all other participants living in city locations in Australia or towns that were in commuting distance from state capitals. Mindfulness instructors worked in government and non-government schools, located in city centres and the outer suburbs.

The educational background of teachers varied. Older participants tended to have multiple qualifications and degrees in a wide range of fields; including business, graphic design, social work, holistic counselling, psychology, horticulture, environmental studies and wellness. Six participants had education degrees, with one participant trained in teaching children mindfulness and using meditation therapy with clients. The highest qualification of a participant was a Doctorate in Philosophy. Participants’ teaching experience in schools and after-school settings varied from two years to 25 years. All teachers taught primary school-aged children, with two additionally teaching high school students. The number of years teaching children mindfulness ranged from two to six years in duration. All participants had a regular mindfulness practice, but at a minimum, they also practiced one other modality, such as yoga. Individual participant demographic information is provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Individual Participant Demographic Information

Pseudonym	Teaching Position	Years Practising MBW	Years Teaching Mindfulness	Learning Facilities' Spiritual Beliefs
Angelica	Specialist Primary School Teacher (5 to 11 years of age)	4 years	2 years	Secular
Ben	Primary School Teacher (10 to 11 years of age)	14 years	2 years	Secular
Caro	Middle School Teacher and Counsellor (12 to 18 years of age)	7 years	2 years	Faith-based
Faith	After-school Program Developer and Teacher (12 to 15 years of age)	6 years	2 years	Secular
Daniella	After-school Program Developer, Special Needs, Primary and High School Teacher (4 to 15 years of age)	8 years	6 years	Secular, Post-secular and Faith-based
Taylor	Primary School Teacher (5 to 8 years of age)	2 years	2 years	Secular
Tilly	Primary School Teacher (5 to 6 years of age)	20 years	3 years	Secular
Cerese	Special Needs, Primary and High School Teacher (5 to 18 years of age)	40 years	15 years	Secular, Post-secular and Faith-based

Data collection and procedure

There were three main points of data collection related to the participant group: 1) demographic information; 2) interviews; and 3) data illustrative of a teacher's practice, such as unpublished materials, worksheets, journals and photos. A trial interview was conducted with a mindfulness instructor and minor changes were made after analysis to the interview process and questions. The interview, together with other illustrative material provided by the trial interviewee, has been included in the analysis process with her written permission. Recruitment of participants started in February 2014, when ethics permission was obtained from the Flinders University ethics committee to interview participants in Australia, New Zealand, Canada and the United States. Invitations were sent directly to instructors located from various sources, such as web sites, journal articles, conferences and the media. It was explained to the teachers that there was a range of options for participation, with the

minimum requirement being to complete a demographic information sheet and participate in a one and a half hour interview/conversation, which could be conducted face-to-face (if the researcher lived near the participant), via Skype, phone or email or a combination of communication modes.

An interview schedule (see Table 2) was devised prior to conversing with teachers and provided a guiding framework for discussing participants’ experiences. However, it is important to note that the schedule acted as a *basis* for a conversation (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008). It was not “prescriptive and certainly not limiting in the sense of overriding the expressed interests of the participant” (Biggerstaff & Thompson, 2008, p. 8). In practice, many questions that I posed to participants deviated from this schedule and a variety of others were asked. For example, I talked with teachers about: their favourite mindfulness activities they share with children; what time of the day they usually practise the techniques with children; how they integrate mindfulness with other learning programs; government policies alignment to mindful education; whether they had tried other techniques besides MBW wellness techniques to help reduce the student stress they were reporting and the core mindfulness activities used in the classroom.

Table 2. Interview Schedule

Interview schedule
<p><i>Mindfulness personal experience and motivation to practice with children</i></p> <p>Q1. What appealed to you about cultivating mindfulness with children?</p> <p>Q2. Would you mind describing your own personal experience with mindfulness/meditation etc.?</p> <p>Q3. What are some of the highlights involved with teaching mindfulness to children? Are there any challenges?</p>
<p><i>Practice</i></p> <p>Q1. Do you follow a specific mindfulness program? What motivated you to use this program? If not, what activities and/or practices do you use in the classroom?</p> <p>Q2. Have you developed any of your own mindfulness activities? What are some of your favourite practices?</p> <p>Q3. Are there any practices that you haven’t tried but would like to try?</p> <p>Q4. How do you integrate mindfulness into daily classroom practice?</p> <p>Q5. Are the activities suited to all age levels or do any need to be adapted or altered?</p>
<p><i>Teacher qualities</i></p> <p>Q1. Are there any special qualities you think a teacher needs to teach mindfulness with children?</p> <p>Q2. What are some of your own qualities that you feel have led you to practice mindfulness with children?</p> <p>Q3. If a teacher is new to practising MindBody Wellness but is keen to teach it in the classroom or with children what suggestions would you make to this person?</p>

As well as asking questions, I also made statements, reframing and confirming what the participants had expressed. Rewording participants dialogue during our conversations encouraged the teachers to explore topics in depth and with greater clarity. One of the most important questions that I asked teachers, often at the conclusion of an interview, was if they would like to raise a salient point that we had perhaps missed during our conversation. This I believe led to rich insights and captured the essence of how they made sense of teaching children mindfulness.

In terms of the interview technique, the foundational IPA text provides limited guidelines. The creators do mention, that when interviewing, the researcher is not attempting to elicit “natural interactions” but rather endeavouring to prompt experiential details, interesting narratives and conceptual frames of understanding (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al., (2009) suggest that in order to bring to life a rich data set embedded within a participant’s experiential awareness, the researcher needs to be clear and confident, build trust and rapport with the participant, listen with focused attention, give the person the space and time to reflect on questions and view the interview as a one-sided conversation. From my perspective, these suggestions resonated with wellness coaching techniques, articulated in one of the first wellness coaching manuals of its kind, by Moore and

Tschannen-Moore (2010). Wellness coaching is described as “the art of creating an environment, through conversation and a way of being, that facilitates the process by which a person can move toward desired goals in a fulfilling manner” (Gallwey, 2000, as cited in Moore & Tschannen-Moore, 2010, p. 3). It is a process or a “way of being” with a client, student or interviewee that fosters self-awareness and generates a space for authentic communication. Principles include mindful communication, honesty, allowing the interviewee to find the answers, warmth and reflective questioning (Moore & Tschannen-Moore, 2010).

Data analysis and reporting

There is not one prescribed, single method for analysing or reporting data when working with IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Each individual will approach analysis and reporting in their own unique way. However, the foundational IPA text and a number of articles on the topic provide researchers with comprehensive guidance. Analysis and reporting of data typically follows an inductive and iterative process drawing on a number of interrelated strategies (Smith, 2007, as cited in Smith et al., 2009, pp. 79–80):

- Identification of themes.
- Convergence and divergence.
- In-depth reflection and analysis.
- Analysis of the whole and the part.
- Connection to other texts and academic literature.

Foremost in an IPA researcher’s mind will be the identification of emerging themes within the data set. The creators of the methodology define a superordinate theme as “a construct which usually applies to each participant within a corpus but which can be manifest in different ways within cases” (Smith et al., 2009, p. 166). Apart from identifying themes it is considered critical to show where participants’ sense making converges and diverges (Smith et al., 2009; Smith, 2011). Researchers need to indicate the prevalence of a theme and the corpus should be well represented in the reporting stage. It is also necessary to pay attention to the detail, such as how words are used and how often certain terms are used. The researcher needs to repeatedly read interview transcripts and other illustrative material, searching for new layers and deeper levels of meaning (Smith et al., 2009).

When analysing transcripts, the researcher additionally focuses on each interviewee and then the lens needs to be readjusted to take into account other participants’ views and how they are connected (Smith et al., 2009). Perspective also should be given to the whole of an individual’s text as well as the parts and how the parts combine to form the whole. One example of paying attention to the whole and the part is to examine the overall writing style of a participant and their specific word usage and how these factors interconnect to form participants’ meaning making. Researchers, during the reporting stage, may also choose to show how other academic literature and texts (e.g., blogs) relate to participants’ stories and help with understanding and interpreting participant meaning making (Smith et al., 2009).

In the current study, I applied a number of methods to ensure research rigour. The first ‘port of call’ was to ensure commensurability between the methods, methodology and epistemology and clearly delineate and articulate each, while being mindful of their interconnectivity. The second step involved engaging with broad criteria established for qualitative research; that is guidelines proposed by Elliot, Fischer, & Rennie (1999) and Tracy (2010). The final destination was the application of “method-appropriate criteria” (Flick, 2014, p. 481), a method which takes into account the nuances and differences between qualitative approaches.

Findings

Overview

In summary, what can be observed from listening to and interpreting teachers' experiences is that a personal MindBody Wellness (MBW) practice catalysed the integration of the whole person—his or her mind, body and spirit. Regular, long-term practise led to enhanced levels of wellbeing and connection to the self, others and the planet. Participants, having personally experienced the benefits of MBW techniques felt an inclination to share their wisdom with others, especially children. This phenomenon corresponds with theoretical models of mindfulness (Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, & Freedman, 2006), Buddhist philosophy (Hardin, 2011) and research in the field (McKenzie, Hassed, & Gear, 2012; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). Studies have shown that a person's intentions for practice shift along a continuum of enhanced wellbeing, moving from concerns consumed with the self to an expanded worldview where the individual considers how, and in what way, his or her actions can benefit the wider community (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009).

The inclination to share mindfulness with the school community was generally given support and encouragement, however, when it wasn't, teachers moved to workplaces where a mindful way of being was valued. Being able to teach mindfulness to children and colleagues further heightened participants' sense of wellbeing and enabled teachers to feel at home in their work environment, creating a conducive environment for learning and being. However, a majority of participants found that some of the rules and conventions governing educational practice were antithetical to cultivating a mindful way of being in the classroom.

Participants emphasised the importance of teaching mindfulness holistically and nourishing the whole of a child's wellbeing. They felt that there were many ways to approach child-centric mindfulness instruction. However, in general, it was the participants' opinion that anyone considering teaching children mindfulness should first come to know and live the practice in his or her own life.

The findings responding to the question, "How do teachers who are experienced MindBody Wellness practitioners make sense of teaching children mindfulness?" were reported within the framework of four inter-connected super-ordinate themes (depicted in Figure 1): Spirituality; Creativity; Responsibility for Nurturing a Child's Wellbeing and Being a Mindful Role Model.



Figure 1. Super-ordinate themes (Albrecht, 2015, p. 113)

Within the super-ordinate theme of spirituality, four sub-themes emerged:

- The devotional nature of practice.
- Connection.
- Workplace spirituality.
- Rituals.

In the current article, I present findings related to the sub-theme of connection.

Connection of a different kind

All participants in the study expressed the view that teaching children mindfulness boosted feelings of connectedness. ‘Connection’, ‘connectedness’, ‘inter-connectedness’ are terms often used in discourses on wellness, spiritual wellbeing, spirituality in general (Albrecht, 2015) and are purported to be the foundation for contemplative pedagogy (Brown, Simmer-Brown, & Grace, 2011). Teachers felt devotion to a mindfulness routine or discipline encouraged them to feel grounded—the practices spoke to the “core of their being”, facilitating a harmonious union between the mind, body and spirit. Study participant, Cerese relates:

The mindset I have regarding my practices is that they are creative investments to nurture and care for my mind, body and spirit.

Angelica in her journal writes about connection first on a personal level:

I am beginning to understand that real healing is so much more than just being an advocate for the disease and myself. The pathway to a better sense of self and well-being comes from practicing MindBody Wellness modalities and from purely connecting with my heart.

Being able to share the practices with children and other colleagues, such as teachers, heightened participants’ sense of wellbeing and feelings of connectedness. As Caro, stated, “I’m just loving it more now that I am able to share it.” Daniella in a similar vein writes, “My natural impulse is to want to share this process with the world, especially children.” In a phone conversation she adds:

And that’s why I couldn’t not share that with anyone; like I just wanted to share that coz it feels so amazing. You know it’s like living life with the lights off or do you want to put them on. It’s like waking up, and even if it’s uncomfortable, at least it’s real and it’s authentic and it’s the truth and you are really feeling it.

We’re here to connect and feel love for ourselves and give love and be of service to love really and I think through getting and acquiring we’ve lost the whole point of why we are here. And it just saddens me.

... to feel that immense love and joy, that’s why we are here and I just think we get side tracked and if we can use any of these tools to feel that deep love and to give it, then that’s why we are here.

In her intuitive artwork (see Figure 2), Daniella portrays her ability to re-connect with her heart and soul through a mindful way of being.



Figure 2. Example of intuitive artwork by participant, Daniella

Faith, in an email interview elaborates on the feelings of connectedness:

On a more spiritual level, hearing young people discuss their insecurities and doubts and receiving such positive reactions from their peers made me feel deeply connected not only to these children but to people in general. It made me see that it is this feeling of connectedness that is important to me. In turn, this realization helped me re-focus my life on doing activities that bring about connectedness, and to place less importance on those that don't (e.g., stressing about finishing my thesis ☺).

Teaching children mindfulness allowed Faith to feel a connection with children that transcended physical boundaries; however, the benefits did not end there. She felt connected with life in general and this impacted her daily routines, where she concentrated on pursuing activities that enhance feelings of interconnectedness.

Angelica, in a Skype interview emphasized the importance of teachers 'truly' connecting with children and listening and acknowledging their 'voices'. She said:

I think Nikki, what it is, is that feeling of connectedness through the teacher and feeling like they are understood. That someone is taking a moment to be with them, being present in that moment, be truly with them and listen to them.

And as Dr Travis says, he says, "It's not just connection. It's the kind of connection". It's creating a different kind of connection between teachers and students and I think that that actually, now that I am talking about it and thinking it through is absolutely fundamental.

It's a different kind of connection.

I think what it does is to take the teacher for the moment out of the expert role, and it levels the playing field. So for example, I don't always lead the breathing. This is why I like this ritual. The way I do it, because the predictability of it all means that we take turns, so that the kids are the leaders you know, you know whenever it comes up in the rotation.

When Angelica was asked later on during the interview whether there was anything in the process of sharing mindfulness with children that stood out or how her interactions with children have changed, she replied:

Oh they open up to me. They really talk to me about how they are feeling and ah...you know I feel like children can't learn unless they are in an emotionally stable place in their mind. So, I know I can't teach until I understand what is going on, so you know we try and focus on the positive but you can't ignore the negative either. They will open up to me about different things that are going on, usually in the playground and at home. So that connection has been a big one.

Angelica's thoughts on "connecting" with children resonated with a recent article in my local Sunday newspaper titled, "Parents must find time to listen to the little people". A counsellor in a conversation on the topic of parenting with newspaper reporter, Lainie Anderson said, "I have a strategy that I often use with families, and it's called 'stopping time'". "If your child is distressed, sit still and listen and if you can't do it then and there, make a deal to chat about it later and stick to it, so they know they can count on you." (Anderson, 2014, p. 87). Like Angelica, the counsellor suggested taking the time to connect with children and listen to their thoughts and feelings. Angelica felt that her own mindfulness practice, being a mindful role model and sharing mindfulness with children in the classroom enabled a deeper level of connection between herself, as a teacher, and her students.

A regular mindfulness practice also appeared to "even up" the discordant power relationships that can sometimes exist between students and teachers in the classroom. Angelica said that establishing mindfulness practices (rituals), which followed the same routines, allowed students opportunities to lead mindfulness sessions with the class. She found that when children were not in her class anymore they were coming back at lunchtime to request mindfulness practice. The students and she noted particularly boys, would say things such as, "Can we have lunch with you?" and "Can we do the breathing?" Angelica said, "It made such an impact on them." Similar to Angelica, Tilly, in a face-to-face interview expressed the importance of mindfulness to learning. Establishing a connection with

children through a mindfulness practice was, at her school, seen as a foundation for effective learning. Tilly says:

... at our school we are big on having a pedagogy and it's all about you know, student learning and students being engaged with their learning and personalising that. And underpinning that is really good relationships and rapport with the kids. So what we are doing with mindfulness fits in with Walker Learning. It fits in with everything and it's about that culture really and how the teachers talk and the teacher language. Teachers I think run on automatic pilot all the time and we don't take that time to be mindful.

Angelica also felt that practising mindfulness as a group enhanced children's capacity to connect with each other. In a Skype interview she relates:

And I think that the power of, you know breathing together, you know, makes you feel more connected to one another which is really important with the kids I teach because some of them, you know, well all of them need a little academic boost and so they come into me from different home rooms. So it helped to build that connectivity, you know in the small groups that I teach as well.

Faith similarly noted that practising mindfulness in groups assisted children to feel more at "home" with their own thoughts and feelings and connected to their peers. In an email interview she writes:

I think that the program was a great "group experience" for the students. They learned that most of their peers have similar thoughts and similar doubts about themselves and that they can share these and be met with understanding. They learned that it is OK to not always be happy and confident and that there are skills they can learn to make themselves feel better. While each student probably had her own agenda for participating (which we might not be aware of), I think that this positive group experience was an outcome for all group members. I am not sure how exactly this impacted on their lives ... maybe this relates to what I said above, that it made them more self-confident and taught them how to slow down and relax.

However, running like an undercurrent through the interview process, amongst a majority of teachers, were ripples of discontent a disconnection to some of the rules and conventions governing educational practice and the way society functions as a whole. Angelica writes in her journal about the rhetoric of educational policy:

At the moment empathy and connection are just words on a page in many schools.

There's a communal numbness. My hope is that teaching and learning about wellness will change this.

Taylor in an email conversation shares the difficulty of making time for mindfulness when there are so many other learning outcomes to attend to:

I think one of the greatest challenges I have faced in teaching mindfulness to children is time. We have such a jam packed curriculum with so many different things we need to teach and fit into a day that sometimes it can be challenging to run proper mindfulness sessions.

Tilly similarly writes in an email interview:

The only real challenge is fitting it in to the curriculum along with all the other demands.

I think it loses priority as teachers are already trying to fit in Literacy, Numeracy and Inquiry learning and then time out for specialists.

I think teachers are so busy and know the importance of time for themselves and students to focus on being calm (Relax, breathe, being mindfulness, meditation etc.) but teaching is such a demanding job that throws curves ball all day long, so it is difficult to add new programs/ideas/activities into the curriculum and timetable.

Teachers are expected to teach and assess and report to so many Ausvel's progression points so teaching and covering the curriculum tends to take priority.

I think as a profession and as a society we value 'being busy' and 'doing things' and we run out of time to tune into ourselves and be kind to ourselves.

Caro affirms the "busyness" that afflicts the school system, accepted almost like a by-product or a way of life. She writes in an email interview:

I had done the mindfulness lessons with the Year 7's but it would be probably be of most benefit to the Year 12's as they will probably be having a fairly stressful year and to start off the year learning some mindfulness skills may help them to get through the year better.

I am also planning to offer the course to teachers here in Term 3 ... Term 3 is often the busiest term for teachers and I thought it might be helpful for them to learn some skills and this might be able to flow through into the classroom and hopefully keep everyone a bit more settled.

The study's strengths and limitations

Inherent within research methodologies are both strengths and limitations. However, carefully choosing a methodology congruent with research objectives and aims serves to minimize the restrictions a methodology may impose on the creation and evolution of knowledge in a field. For example, the research question posed in the current study was, "How do teachers who are experienced MindBody Wellness practitioners make sense of teaching children mindfulness?" The study focused on personal meaning and sense making in a particular context for people who share a common experience. If the research question was instead, "What factors influence how teachers incorporate mindfulness in schools?" Grounded Theory would be a more appropriate methodology to use (Smith et al., 2009).

The idiographic nature of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) analysis, where the uniqueness of an individual's feelings and perceptions is considered paramount, may be viewed as a methodological weakness (Pringle, Drummond, McLafferty, & Hendry, 2011). However, in the case of IPA it is seen as a strength; as each individual is considered to be an important part of the whole and one individual's experience while not replicating another individual's may lead to important insights and understandings. Another limitation in a study of this nature is that the researcher cannot control, for example, teachers embellishing benefits of the practice. Additionally, in the research project, material illustrative of practice was included in the analysis stage, supplementing interviews. Material collected ranged from reports conducted by other researchers to personal journals. I felt, when this material was supplied by teachers that it helped give depth and provided a "more rounded" account of teachers' experiences.

It has also been suggested that the dominant scientific paradigm of a "third person approach", meaning the creation of knowledge based on observations or interviews, does not comply with grasping the intricacies of mindfulness (Schmidt & Kupper, 2012). "A first person experience can never be fully caught in language" (Schmidt & Kupper, 2012, p. 172). In the current project I have attempted to capture and relate the essence of some aspects of teachers' mindfulness practice. It is hoped that the beliefs and insights that underpin teachers' words resonate with the reader's imagination and that he or she is able to paint their own personal picture, one that transcends the limitations of our language.

Discussion

What can be observed from listening to and interpreting teachers' experiences is that teaching children mindfulness enabled a deeper level of connection amongst students and also between students and teachers. As Angelica, poignantly remarked, mindfulness enables, "connection of a different kind". This whole class connection was seen by teachers as a foundation for effective learning and corresponds with findings in qualitative research undertaken with novice mindfulness practitioners. It was found in a study exploring school staff experiences of learning mindfulness over a six-week

period that a mindfulness practice fostered a positive learning environment (Burrows, 2011a). Becoming more aware of thoughts, feelings and the body's reactions catalysed "self-regulation skills and the capacity for a calm, focused mind—a mind with the openness, responsiveness and sensitivity for optimal teaching, guiding and learning" (Burrows, 2011a, p. 219). Similarly, Motha (2015) found in a narrative exploration, underpinned by phenomenological philosophy that practising mindfulness and meditation enabled teachers to better connect with their thoughts and feelings, which in turn cultivated benevolent engagement with students. She posits that mindfulness helps to shape a holistic contemplative pedagogy, one which enhances a teacher's understanding of their profession and the lives of their students.

Apart from encouraging a deeper level of connection with the self and children, some of my participants also felt that sharing mindfulness with colleagues and the practice given respect and credence in the school system helped them to feel at home and connected to the workplace, creating a conducive environment for learning and "being". However, while teachers were valiantly attempting to create effective and harmonious environments in which to learn and work together as a community, mindfulness was also being used as a panacea for stress in the system—much like a Panadol is taken to relieve the pain of a headache. This suggests we need to investigate and remedy the underlying causes of unproductive stress, stress that is implied to be impacting both students and teachers. It was expressed by one teacher, Tilly, that as a society we value being "busy" and as such some of the structures we have created may be actively working against approaching life from a more harmonious and balanced perspective. This view, while not prominent in the literature, is acknowledged and discussed. Purser and Milillo (2015, p. 14) argue that the "mindfulness movement has yet to engage in seriously questioning as to why stress is so pervasive" in institutions.

Tilly, together with some of other study participants, felt that one of the greatest challenges in effectively teaching mindfulness with children in schools was time. Teachers had difficulty devoting satisfactory amounts of time to effectively enhancing mindfulness due to a "jam packed" curriculum. In order to help remedy this problem and encourage effective integration of mindfulness in schools, Tilly suggested that mindfulness needs to be explicitly and implicitly incorporated in pre-service teacher education and additionally recognised in government curriculum statements. However, she did not think that learning about mindfulness should be compulsory as it went against core mindfulness principles, that is, the invitational nature of the practice.

Study participant Angelica's views varied slightly to Tilly's. She acknowledged the difficulty of making the time to share mindfulness with children, but felt that it was essential to enhance learning and also aligned closely "with the twenty-first century notion of schooling" (Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2014, p. 3). For Angelica, sharing mindfulness with children offered a means to actualise policy, moving beyond the rhetoric. Likewise, Rix and Bernay (2014, p. 201) found that a mindfulness practice made a "strong contribution to the key competencies outlined in the New Zealand curriculum" when investigating the impact of an eight-week mindfulness program conducted with six to 11-year-olds together with six classroom teachers. The mindfulness program (developed by the researcher, Rix), aligned with the New Zealand Curriculum (2007) and was underpinned by a Māori model of *hauora* (holistic wellbeing). This research, I believe, underscores the importance of embedding, formally outlining and teaching how a mindfulness practice connects with established curriculum documents, wellness frameworks and professional teaching standards. There is a myriad of ways mindfulness enables the actualisation of a school, state or nation's educational policy and pedagogy—understanding, researching and documenting these links will be critical to the world-wide progression of child-centric mindfulness instruction.

Conclusion and recommendations

Teachers, en masse, in various countries around the world are teaching children techniques to cultivate loving kindness, compassion and inner peace (Black, Milam, & Sussman, 2009; Kaltwasser et al., 2014). Findings from this study indicate that teaching children mindfulness boosted feelings of connectedness. Practising mindfulness personally and professionally helped the study participants to feel grounded and enabled teachers to discover and develop a deeper connection with their students. This in turn helped to improve learning outcomes and general wellbeing for both students and teachers. For some participants, mindfulness also acted as a means to actualise educational policy.

However, other teachers discussed a tension between a mindful way of being and curriculum priorities. They didn't feel that they could allocate a sufficient amount of time to mindfulness due to a "jam-packed" schedule. It is recommended that future researchers in the area focus on understanding how mindfulness aligns with a school, state or nation's educational practice, policy and pedagogy curriculum.

Participants suggested that it would be beneficial for universities to explicitly and implicitly teach and integrate mindfulness during a student teacher's pre-service education. There are many universities such as Monash University in Australia, Auckland University of Technology in New Zealand and the University of Toronto in Canada where mindfulness is integrated with teacher training. Understanding and documenting how to best equip pre-service education students with the skills to teach mindfulness in the classroom will also be vital for the advancement of this field of wisdom. Additionally, we also need to consider how to best support teachers in schools, where mindfulness is being integrated.

It could not be clearly deciphered during the interview process whether teachers were actively trying to change the system or just implementing techniques to cope with a system they perceived to be inducing high levels of stress. Researchers in the area may want to "dig a bit deeper" to understand whether mindfulness is being used simply as a panacea, much like a Panadol, or if it is additionally being implemented as a means to effect systemic change—to alter the underlying policies, viewpoints and actions that contribute to negative stress.

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