

Mind full or Mindful?

If there was a potential solution to decrease student anxiety and stress levels in your school would you find a way to include it in your curriculum?



Are you an educational leader who understands that students' wellbeing concerns are on the increase? Are you aware of research that is being conducted that indicates student stress levels are skyrocketing and school is being cited as the primary concern?

If there was a potential solution to decrease student anxiety and stress levels in your school would you find a way to include it in your curriculum? Or would you consider it too difficult to include one more thing in an overcrowded curriculum and fear that the teachers would complain about yet another thing they have to do in their day?

What if it didn't have to be difficult? What if

it didn't have to take up an enormous amount of time? What if the data supported the use of this in other fields and was being explored to find the most effective way of implementing this into your school on a daily basis to achieve enormous results? What if it meant meditation instead of medication and life skills that your students would utilise for a lifetime?

Have you considered the power of mindfulness?

The Australian Psychological Society (APS) has conducted its fifth successive national Stress and wellbeing in Australia survey and it is reported that:

"The half decade snapshot shows that Australians are faring worse than they were in 2011 when the survey began, reporting lower levels of wellbeing"

and workplace wellbeing and higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety symptoms.

Australians' levels of wellbeing have fluctuated over the five years. A slight improvement was recorded in 2014 and 2015 but wellbeing still remains lower than that in 2011 when the APS first surveyed Australians on this important measure." (<http://www.psychology.org.au/Assets/Files/PW15-SR.pdf>)

Although this is a snapshot of both adults and young people, it is highly indicative of how our Australian students are faring when it comes to stress, depression and anxiety symptoms.

Jasmina Rowe, Clinical Practice Supervisor at Kids Helpline asserts that "Childhood stress has increased in the past few decades, with around 40 per cent of kids reporting that they worry too much" (www.kidsmatter.edu.au).

One of the biggest contributors to increased stress and anxiety levels is school:

"There is a lot of pressure on students today to perform at school, and there seems to be even more pressure within the peer group. The increase in the amount of homework students receive, fear of failure, worrying about fitting in, self-identity, and bullying are some of the more common reasons for stress in schools." (www.kidsmatter.edu.au)

One solution to this problem could be the effective addition of 'mindfulness' to the curriculum. In fields such as medicine, psychology, psychotherapy and business, mindfulness has been proven to have a plethora of benefits when used effectively.

More recently the education systems especially in the United Kingdom and Europe have sought these strategies in order to alleviate stress and anxiety in school-aged children. *The Age*, in 2015 published a story on the proliferation of "mindfulness very gently moving around the world's classrooms".

This article focuses specifically on mindfulness meditation which is defined as: "the practice of quietening the mind to bring awareness and attention to the present moment". It is of interest to me that this modality is increasingly being used in schools around the world. As cited by Kabat-Zinn (2003) traditionally mindfulness has been considered the 'heart' of Buddhist meditation (Thera, 1962). It resides at the core of the teachings of Buddha (Gunnaratana, 1992; Hanh, 1999; Nanamoli, Bodhi, 1995). Buddha could be considered a prolific scientist who managed to use his mind and body:

"to great effect to delve into the nature of the human condition. What emerged from this arduous and single-minded contemplative investigation was a series of profound insights, a comprehensive view of human-nature, and a formal 'medicine' for treating its fundamental 'dis-ease' typically characterised as the three 'poisons'; greed, hatred (aversion), and ignorance/delusion (unawareness)." (Kabat-Zinn; 2003, p. 145)

The Harvard Graduate School of Education in

their *Making Caring Common* project found that research is increasingly reporting the credible benefits of mindfulness including stress reduction, emotion regulation, better relationship satisfaction, and improved memory and attention. Harvard also report that mindfulness can be relatively easy to implement and does not need to be time consuming which is ideal due to the fact that educational organisations, in my opinion, do not want to reduce time in an already overcrowded curriculum to support these types of programmes.

Jones and Bouffard (2012) concur asserting that, "research warrants a new perspective and highlights a range of new approaches and support strategies that are designed to be time-efficient, low-cost, and integrated with (rather than distracting from) academic curricula."

Harvard has also discovered that evaluations of school-based mindfulness have demonstrated positive findings such as increased attention, self-control, positive class participation and respect for others and as a result can also be excellent in terms of classroom management. Reduction of stress for teachers was an additional benefit that was realised.

My interest in mindfulness came from personal experience: in my years of teaching I have witnessed many students suffer from extreme stress-associated disorders. I am concerned by the amount of medication that proliferates in our contemporary schools. The expectation in a Drama classroom is that you explicitly perform and many students, even the ones who love to perform, suffer anxieties around this, which is not dissimilar to performance anxiety in other subject areas. After witnessing several hospitalisations due to panic attacks and pre-show nerves that debilitated students I began to explore other options. Taking on a yearlong yoga teacher training course, I established new skills that I could bring to my classrooms. The success rate when introducing a modicum of mindfulness was tangible and it made me wonder what this approach could possibly achieve mainstream. That is why I have decided to focus on this for my Graduate research and then my PhD.

The notion of mindfulness is centuries old; however, the concept of having mindfulness as a part of the national curriculum is a recent occurrence. Liz Graham reports that:

"Mindfulness – the practice of quieting the mind and bringing attention to the present – as a school-taught activity is on the rise, with a campaign to have it on the national curriculum by 2020." (Graham; 2016)

The World Health Organisation has projected that mental health issues are likely to form the biggest burden on healthcare resources by as soon as 2030. It is evident that mindfulness can be a part of the answer as it is considered a real solution to the pressures of contemporary life. The methodical collection of data indicating the benefits of mindfulness pro-



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grammes dates from the 1980s and Jon Kabat-Zinn's mindfulness training programmes have been successfully appropriated in many areas of the health sector.

Professor Mark Williams and colleagues at Oxford University have further adapted mindfulness for the treatment of depression developing Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT). Clinical trials have demonstrated that this type of therapy has been as effective as anti-depressants without harmful side effects, now supported by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence as an efficacious therapy. Kuyken, *et al.* (2008) assert that depression is a predominant health concern due to the prevalence of relapses which can range as high as 80%. MBCT was discovered to be more effective in reducing these recurrent relapses as well as increasingly effective in reducing the consumption of antidepressant medication.

Mindfulness has also been described as “*the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment*” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.144). It is an essential piece of human consciousness and a mental capacity that can be strengthened through a variety of training methods. Mindfulness meditation is one such method. Although mindfulness meditation has ancient roots in Buddhist practice, instructors of mindfulness in the West have adapted traditional mindful awareness practices into a secular discipline for the psychological and medical benefits they provide.

The myriad benefits include self-control (Bishop, *et*

al., 2004; Masicampo, Baumeister, 2007), objectivity (Adele, Feldman, 2004; Brown, Ryan, Creswell, 2007; Leary, Tate, 2007; Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, Freedman, 2006), affect tolerance (Fulton, 2005), enhanced flexibility (Adele, Feldman, 2004) equanimity, (Morgan, Morgan, 2005), improved concentration and mental clarity (Young, 1997), emotional intelligence (Walsh, Shapiro, 2006) and the ability to relate to others and oneself with kindness, acceptance and compassion (Fulton, 2005; Wallace, 2001).

Kuyken, *et al.* (2014) assert that mindfulness has a body of research conducted on adults; however, there are limited controlled trials that have been evaluated when it comes to their effectiveness on young people. The findings of Kuyken, *et al.*'s (2014) research conducted in 12 secondary schools indicates that rates of acceptability were high and that the degree to which students practised mindfulness skills correlated directly to an association with better wellbeing. Weare (2013) found that when mindfulness is taught well and practised regularly, benefits such as improved wellbeing, increased self-regulation, increased positive behaviour and academic outcomes are evident. Both Kuyken, *et al.* (2014) and Weare (2013) specify that this is a promising *young* field of study as most studies have been pilots with small numbers. Kaunhoven and Dorjee (2017) also agree that initial findings are that mindfulness leads to increased self-regulation; however,

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neurodevelopmental studies on mindfulness with pre-adolescents are scarce. This is promising as these findings indicate that there is not an overabundance of these studies being conducted in this field. The work of Harpin, *et al.* (2016) is particularly interesting to me in terms of its structure as I intend to write a pilot programme and implement this in schools in the future.

“The purpose of this pilot study was to test a 10-week Mindfulness program that was integrated daily at the morning homeroom check-in with a classroom of 4th graders, and compared to a matched comparison classroom. Teachers provided pre-intervention and post-intervention data on student behavior and academic performance; students gave qualitative feedback about the program. While there were no significant differences on the Mindfulness measures, teachers reported significant differences in prosocial behaviors, emotional regulation, and academic performance within group and across comparison groups.” (Harpin, *et al.*, 2016. p.149)

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Mindfulness helps you go home to the present. And every time you go there and recognize a condition of happiness that you have, happiness comes.

Nhat Hanh