

## Discussion Paper 19

# Mindful Teachers, Mindful Kids, Peaceful Schools

### Introduction

This discussion paper is one in a series designed to stimulate discussion and sharing of experience, amongst staff in educational settings working with children who may have experienced complex relational trauma.

The paper compliments and extends training provided through the ACF delivered SMART program and the initiative of the South Australian Government Department for Education and Child Development.

The focus here will be on the topic of 'Mindfulness' and how its practice may be useful in education settings.

### What is this thing called 'Mindfulness'?

Definitions of Mindfulness vary, but for the purposes of this paper, we will base our discussion on the definition by John Kabat-Zinn: "*Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way; on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally.*"

Mindfulness is currently a hot topic in Western psychological circles. This widespread current interest might lead to a perception that this is something new, but in fact this is an ancient practice common to Eastern spiritual traditions. As Western culture has become more aware of these traditional practices, scientists have become interested in

verifying anecdotal claims of their benefits. Research findings of the neurobiological and clinical effects of mindfulness practice are increasingly impacting on the practice of mental health practitioners and educators.

### **Research findings:**

Mindfulness training has been used successfully to treat a range of stress and anxiety related disorders.

To date, research findings have shown that people who practice mindfulness can have:

- thicker cortical regions related to attention and sensory processing
- heightened empathic awareness
- more reactive immune responses
- better stress regulation
- enhanced relationships
- reduction in symptoms of anxiety
- improved attention and social skills

### **Mindfulness and the brain**

The Medial Pre-frontal Cortex is thought to be the 'mindfulness centre' of the brain. It has direct connections with the Amygdala in the limbic system. When we focus our attention in the moment, during the practice of mindfulness, the pre-frontal cortex is activated, and the Amygdala is able to 'stand down' from its work of keeping us on alert to danger. This allows us to be both calm and aware- an ideal state for learning.

Long-term mindfulness practice increases activity in the Medial Pre-frontal Cortex, precipitating growth of connections in this highly evolved and integrated area of the brain. Dr Dan Siegel associates the medial prefrontal cortex with nine forms of attunement: body regulation, attuned communication, emotional balance, response flexibility, empathy, self-knowing awareness, fear-modulation, intuition, and morality-surely qualities we would all want to develop in ourselves and in the children in our care!

### **Mindfulness practice for teachers**

Busy teachers will be pleased to know that Mindfulness doesn't need to become yet another "add-on" to an already overloaded classroom routine. Mindfulness-based activities can easily be integrated into what you are already doing in the classroom and the whole school environment and are well-suited to circle time, home groups, a morning meeting, staff meetings and classroom transitions. Mindfulness-based processes such as songs, stories and activities can be purposeful and fun, and give

teachers and students an opportunity to practice them together. This can also support student's ability to practice these activities as a form of self-regulation.

To teach mindfulness to students in an authentic way, teachers need to practice what they teach.

### **Mindfulness practice for children & young people**

As students slow down, breathe and focus, their minds tend to quiet and a space opens up in their moment-to-moment experience that allows them to see what's happening in and around them more clearly and to make wiser choices. Through this process students become more attuned to their inner and outer worlds- including to each other.

#### **Questions for staff discussion:**

What are the mindful practices and approaches that are already occurring at your school?

If you were to take a whole-of-school approach towards making yours a Mindful School, where would you start? What might your planning look like?

What would be your school's main purpose for becoming a Mindful School? If the Minister for Education visited your school, how would you justify the decision/priority to embed mindfulness into the culture and practice of your school?

What would need to change for staff, if your school were to become a Mindful School?

How could you embed elements of mindfulness into your staff meetings?

What could you do to give yourself a mindful start to every school day?

How could you give students a mindful start to their school day?

How could you embed elements of mindfulness into the curriculum at your school?

What might mindfulness practice look like in a classroom of 5 and 6 year old children? How would you help them to understand the benefits of mindfulness?

What might mindfulness practice look like in a classroom of 10 and 11 year old children? How would you help them to understand the benefits of mindfulness?

What might mindfulness practice look like in a Year 11 and 12 classroom with 16 & 17 year olds? How could you help them to understand the benefits of mindfulness?

How could you embed mindful practice into the daily classroom routines for students? e.g. coming back into the classroom after lunch and recess, starting and ending the day, other transitions throughout the day...

How would you inform parents about, and involve them in, your mindful approach to educating their children?

### Useful Resources/Links

<http://thehawnfoundation.org/the-mindup-curriculum-now-available-through-scholastic/>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LpMvTTlr2p4>

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LiyaSr5aeho>

Alderfer, Lauren, *Mindful Monkey, Happy Panda*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2011

*How to nurture teacher mindfulness. Downloadable E-booklet found at* <http://blogs.terrapinn.com/happiness/2012/12/03/nurture-teacher-mindfulness-caring-classroom/>

Greenland, Susan K., *The Mindful Child*, Free Press, New York, 2010

MacLean, Kerry Lee, *Moody Cow Meditates*, Wisdom Publications, Boston, 2009

Thich Nhat Hanh and the Plum Village Community, *Planting Seeds: practicing mindfulness with children*, Parallax Press, Berkeley, California, 2011

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