

# Relational Mindfulness in Education

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**Relational mindfulness can help educators to address the management, teaching, and emotional challenges of classroom and school environments more successfully.**

If educators are to successfully address the management, teaching, and emotional challenges of classroom and school environments, they need a high degree of social and emotional competence (Jennings et al. 2011). Research (Burrows 2008, 2010, 2011b; Day 2004; Jennings & Greenberg 2009) suggests there is a need for programs to help educators respond calmly to unsettling and provocative student behavior and not inadvertently escalate these behaviors by their reactions. It is suggested in this paper that “relational mindfulness” (Safran & Reading 2008), an approach which invites us to listen in depth to ourselves, the other, and the relational field between us by integrating mindfulness practices with Western counseling skills, has the potential to assist educators to maintain equanimity in intense classroom and school environments.

Jennings & Greenberg (2009) have found that mindfulness can be a valuable resource for educators to be more aware of the emotional climate in their classrooms. Thomas (2010) has also suggested that mindfulness practice can help educators develop calmer responses to the day-to-day pressures that teaching brings. A recent study (Burrows 2011b) found that the challenging relationships that can arise between adults in school communities also urgently need to be addressed, since a number of the participants in that study chose to focus on a relationship with a colleague that was causing them considerable concern and was contributing to feelings of frustration, anger, stress, emotional imbalance, anxiety, and professional ineffectiveness.

Mindfulness, according to Fulton (2005), can build relational competence among professionals when it is practiced implicitly as part of one’s professional way of being. Mindfulness may indeed be as Weare (2010, 4) has suggested, “the missing piece in social

Note: All participant comments are from their reflective journals, unless otherwise noted.



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and emotional learning.” Bishop (2002, 92) has described mindfulness as

a state in which one is highly aware and focused on the reality of the present moment, accepting and acknowledging it, without getting caught up in thoughts that are about the situation or in emotional reactions to the situation.

Relational mindfulness then can be described as a

deepening awareness of the present relational experience, with acceptance, where connection is described as the core of psychological well-being and is the essential quality of growth fostering and healing relationships. (Surrey 2005, 92)

This paper focuses on the question of whether the practice of relational mindfulness can help educators maintain equanimity in the midst of emotionally charged classroom and school environments. Fulton (2005) suggests that equanimity has two meanings: an open, calm receptivity and a kind of realistic attitude that there are limits to what professionals can do to help since the responsibility for change rests with the individual. The relational mindfulness inquiry project described in this paper was aimed at creating a supportive, calming, and nonjudgmental context in which educators would be willing to have open and honest conversations about their experience of practicing relational mindfulness during challenging interactions with a student or a colleague.

### Participants

The participants in this inquiry project were recruited by a school counselor who had previously attended a presentation on an earlier relational mindfulness inquiry project (see Burrows 2011b). She felt that a number of her colleagues in local schools and the regional office of the education department would be interested in undertaking a relational mindfulness inquiry project and sent out an invitation to local education sites. Other than the school counselor, the participants were not previously known to the researcher. Participants were provided with information at the first session and invited to give their informed consent to participate in the project. Ethical clearance from the education depart-

ment was not required, but it was obtained from the university before any data collection took place.

Eight educators/leaders began the six 90-minute sessions over a 10-week period, but one of the participants chose not to continue after two sessions while another elected to join the group for the activities but not to take part in the research component. The research participants included a director of a community child care center, a school counselor, two primary class teachers from the same school, and two advisors based in a regional office of the education department.

All participants were highly experienced educators with a common interest in student wellbeing. Half the participants had some previous experience of mindfulness or other meditation practices. As group leader/researcher I brought experience in teaching and educational leadership in various education settings, as well experience in counseling, meditation, and developing skills in leading mindfulness meditation.

### Activities Undertaken by Participants

Each session involved the sharing of information about mindfulness, and mindfulness meditation practice that included short periods of sitting together in silence with eyes closed sensing the soles of the feet and arms and legs, and reflective sharing about experiences and concerns. Participants were invited to select as a confidential case study a student or colleague whose behavior was causing them concern and to reflect on their experiences of practicing relational mindfulness in the context of that relationship through at least three anonymous entries in a reflective journal. Participants were asked to practice body sensing and grounding meditation each week in the group and at other times, particularly when they knew they were going to be in the presence of their case study student or colleague.

### Methodological Orientation

While the majority of mindfulness studies have adopted quantitative approaches using a range of mindfulness scales (Rapgay & Bystrisky 2009), according to Kabat-Zinn (2003, 149), the “radical, transformative essence” in mindfulness can be lost if there is too great a focus on the measurement of clini-

cal change. For Kabat-Zinn, mindfulness is a phenomenological description of simple and effective ways of cultivating various aspects of mind and heart through mindful attention. Childs (2007) similarly sees mindfulness as an actual phenomenological reality that presents itself to our immediate awareness as a whole way of experiencing or feeling. A qualitative relational phenomenological research approach therefore seemed appropriate for this study.

As researcher and guide, I tried in our sessions to maintain a phenomenological attitude of being open, receptive, grounded, present, engaged, curious, and empathetically attuned to myself and the participants (Todres 2007). Through my attentiveness to the nuances of their verbal expressions in the sessions, I hoped to be able to encourage participants "to authentically bring forth the unsaid to the said" which Todres (2007, 182) has suggested is one of the strengths of the phenomenological approach.

I used the same mode of being when reading the journal entries which formed the main data source. I found that reading the reflections conjured up for me a sense of the energetic presence of the participants and I could "feel into" their comments. In many cases some of the experiences had been previously shared in our group meetings and my memory of these accounts combined with my reading of the later reflections brought the experiences vividly to life and helped me to make the connections.

I read and re-read the journal entries, looking for nuances and subtleties of expression and experience, often seeing something in later readings that I had previously missed. I found that breaking some entries into shorter lines similar to those in poetry seemed to draw out and evoke their "felt" qualities to enhance phenomenological apprehension. The process of working with clusters of words helped me to gain a deeper understanding through their sounds, shapes, rhythms, rhymes, and patterns.

### Emerging Findings

The emerging findings from this inquiry project suggest that the practice of relational mindfulness privately and in the group sessions contributed to the participants' gradual but developing sense that they could at times maintain open, calm receptivity in the midst of emotionally charged classroom and

school environments. The experience of mindfulness is clearly not only cognitive but also involves embodied and affective experience according to Todres (2007). In this section I want to re-present the participants' experiences in a way that evokes their presence and aliveness and therefore have chosen to use selected verbatim accounts from participants to highlight particular results and findings.

The very first journal entries conveyed a strong sense that one of the main benefits of the relational mindfulness practice in the group and at work was the way it enhanced their capacity to be more aware of the reality of the present moment. An example of this is childcare center director Cathy's heightened awareness of the relational field in her center at different times of the day.

When parents enter the membrane of our centre with their child, with accompanying siblings, bags and auras of urgency I am overcome by the force of the surrounding emotions. Due to the shared sensitivities of the day, we are so connected to the child's emotions that the moment the parent returns we sense the immediacy of the urgency of the child to be acknowledged.

All of the participants reported changes in their felt experience of thoughts, feelings, listening, observing, slowing down, being grounded, self-awareness, and their own and others' reactions. Cathy also found that

mindfulness has made me slow down when I am engaged with a staff member. I suspected it might. This must have been noted by the other person as they too slowed down their speech as if they realize that I now have time to listen to their message in its entirety.

Similarly Alysha, a regional advisor, found that when she gave her case study, a teenage girl, some space and did not respond automatically, she could readjust her own responses, thoughts, and emotions.

The process of actively inquiring through reflective discussion and journaling into the experience of relational mindfulness during emotionally difficult situations at work turned out to be a "path of understanding" for a number of the participants, as Todres (2007, 36) has suggested. Indeed, Angela, a primary

class teacher, acknowledged that “mindfulness takes more than an intellectual understanding.”

For most of the participants, maintaining equanimity in emotionally provocative situations was more challenging than they had initially anticipated. Many found that their experience of becoming more aware of the present moment also tended to heighten their awareness of disturbing or potentially overwhelming thoughts and emotions. For example, although Alysha already practiced mindfulness meditation, she found it was

much more difficult than I anticipated to witness my own powerful emotions and not automatically react.... I was really surprised at how often I respond without taking the time to stop and witness my own emotions and the impact they may have on others.

Similarly, Mandy, also an experienced mindfulness practitioner, was quite taken aback to find how her conditioned habits and responses only seemed to intensify when she attempted to practice mindfulness in a situation that involved one of her special needs students and another teacher:

He was throwing pencils around, not at anyone specifically. The teacher believed they were being thrown at her and instantly started yelling, accusing, belittling and storming into her office and loudly slamming the door.

She became aware of many conflicting emotions arising within her at that point: guilt at not stepping in to rescue her student; disgust and pity towards the teacher’s behavior; pride that she was not directly involved; concern for the student and the rest of the class who were also seeing it unfold; and feelings of weakness, confusion, and “squirminess.” She reported that as the intensity of her feelings increased, her desire to try to remember to be mindful decreased. However, as she noted in her journal, “at least I was aware I was forgetting it!”

A number of participants gradually became more aware as a result of their own practice that mindfulness involved accepting what is and being aware without expectations or needs. One participant, Mandy, journaled:

Can I simply??? be mindful without it having a connotation or expectance of anything? Can I just be mindful? Can I give up wanting something from him and instead maybe give him something?

Lyn, a school counselor, likewise found that her relational mindfulness practice and groundedness led to an enhanced ability to be more accepting of two 7th-year students she had previously dreaded encountering.

When I saw Beth & Tanya waiting by my office door again I had that sinking feeling. Putting on my mask of pleasantness, we went into my office. As we sat I began the grounding exercise: smile, nod, listen, & feel my feet and inside my skin until the mask slipped and the smile & the listening were genuine. Later I repeated the grounding exercise with more attention [and] re-experienced the same sensations.... The next time I met with them I was aware of going into grounding automatically when they entered.

Later journal entries suggest that the practice of relational mindfulness helped a number of participants appreciate that they no longer needed to try to drive desirable change or fix anything that was broken, but could rather allow thoughts or emotions to arise in their consciousness or be expressed by others without needing to judge them, which Fulton (2005) has suggested is a likely outcome of mindfulness practice. For example, Cathy’s experience of practicing mindfulness at work in the presence of her colleagues led to a powerful realization that

the feelings of well-being I have due to my reserving judgment and being in my body when talking to my colleagues has been tantamount to a feeling of what can be described as Grace and this I feel is projected out to the other person.

Two participants reported significant changes in the way their case study subject related to and responded to them as a result of their practice of relational mindfulness. For example, Michelle, a classroom teacher reflected on the changes in her relationship with a colleague:

Today was the first time I could talk with her and not let memories of the terrible words we exchanged a year ago surface. This might not sound much but it is absolutely amazing to me. I feel this course is helping on a "higher" level to "fix" things between the two of us.

### Discussion

This study has found that a number of elements contributed to the positive results that were experienced by participants in this inquiry project.

*The felt experience of relational mindfulness.* The experience of mindfulness in the presence of others as an actual phenomenological reality appears to have been a key element in assisting participants to be more present and begin to observe thoughts and emotions as they arose without needing to react to them. One participant described this experience as "substantial." This study has provided additional new information about educators' actual experience of mindfulness in the presence of others.

*A supportive group environment.* This study highlighted the importance of a supportive group environment to assist participants to maintain their focus and develop and deepen their experience over time (Kabat-Zinn 2003). This is reflected in a participant's observation that "... paying attention is so much easier in the sessions than in the classroom and yard."

*The opportunity to engage in positive and connected conversations.* Beaudoin (2011) has observed that negativity can easily creep into staffroom conversations, particularly when the discussion turns to system policy changes, colleagues, parents, or to students with challenging behaviors. Such problem-oriented conversations often do not include the complexity of human experience or foster feelings of compassion for someone else's struggles (Beaudoin 2011). This study has shown the importance of providing a supportive environment in which educators can feel safe to share their concerns and their learning.

*Professional (counseling) supervision.* During the course of the project the group meetings unintentionally took on the character of a supervision support group. As Thomas (2010) has noted, while teaching is a complex and stressful profession, educators are rarely able to access the sort of support that counselors and social workers receive. This study has dem-

onstrated that the group sessions in this project were able to provide a vehicle for both the practice of mindfulness and the receipt of professional support and guidance on issues that arose as a result of participants' inquiries into themselves and their professional way of being. Some form of counseling training is likely to be extremely beneficial for anyone wishing to facilitate relational mindfulness professional development for educators and it may even be essential given the issues that may arise in the sessions.

*An experienced mindfulness teacher and guide.* This project had the advantage of having a guide experienced in personal mindfulness meditation and developing experience as a mindfulness meditation teacher. It also demonstrated that an experienced guide is indeed necessary, which reflects the literature on the pedagogy of mindfulness that places considerable emphasis on the importance of the teacher or guide who authentically embodies the spirit and essence of the practices being taught. This is seen as a way of catalysing the capacity for mindfulness within the students. If this is as essential as McCown, Reibel, & Micozzi (2010) attest, consideration needs to be given the training of others who wish to facilitate relational mindfulness courses for educators like the one described in this paper.

### Conclusion

This small study has found that relational mindfulness can help educators and leaders who wish to more successfully address the management, teaching, and emotional challenges of classroom and school environments. It suggests that educators who want to develop the capacity to maintain equanimity in extremely charged emotional environments are likely to benefit from regular relationally-oriented mindfulness practice that explores current issues in the company of colleagues and led by an experienced mindfulness teacher/counselor. While the literature emphasizes mindfulness training and experience, the relational counseling and psychotherapy literature emphasizes counseling training and experience. Relational mindfulness is in effect an integration of the two in which the emphasis is on deepening awareness of the present relational experience (Surrey 2005, 92).

Further research is needed to explore whether the practice of relational mindfulness can succeed in helping educators to change their practice over a longer term.

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