TRANSFORMING ANGER IN THE CLASSROOM INTO WISDOM THROUGH MINDFULNESS: A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

The case is presented of a teacher who is severely tested by a student diagnosed with relational trauma whose aggressive behaviours regularly catalyse intense emotions in herself and her other students. Through her own mindfulness practice she gradually develops the capacity to create a steady, firm yet loving connection with him. As a result he gradually begins to contain his own behavior and reduce his apparent need to relive his own hurts over and over again. Other students in the class are shown to also benefit from her more calm and centred responses. Background information on the 'soles of the feet' meditation and excerpts from the teacher's reflective journal is shared, highlighting the potential value of including mindfulness in teacher professional learning programs to assist teachers to respond with flexibility and compassion to the emotional energy of students with trauma-related conditions.

Introduction

After a number of years spent teaching, researching and consulting with schools I have come to the view that emotions in the classroom can helpfully be viewed as messengers, information bearers and teachers rather than negative energies needing to be tamed, suppressed or denied (Chogyam & Dechen, 1997) particularly in relation to working with highly sensitive young people with trauma-related conditions. In recent years I have begun therefore to develop a form of teacher professional learning based in mindfulness and reflective practice and aimed at assisting teachers and student teachers to be more insightful, fluid, flexible and kind, in how they respond to their own and others' emotions to create more positive, calm and wellbeing-oriented learning and working environments.

This paper focuses on one case from a recent study of 25 school leaders and teachers from six schools nationally that explored the potential of mindfulness and reflection to assist them to deal more effectively with difficult encounters at work with a student, colleague or parent. In all of the 14 cases involving students, an underlying trauma –related condition was found to be a significant factor contributing to their aggressive behaviours. In this particular case study the experience of one year 6 teacher who identified a student diagnosed with post -traumatic stress disorder and oppositional defiance disorder as her focus for self-inquiry is explored.

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Emotions

According to Sherwood (2008) anger is the single greatest emotion that challenges teachers. While teachers commonly use behavioural and cognitive behavioural strategies to try to 'control' student outbursts of aggression, these may however intensify behaviours in children with underlying trauma conditions (Burrows, 2011; Cairns, 2002; Jureidini, nd; Sherwood, 2008) leading to an escalation of the initial behavior.

Mindfulness teachers and writers Chogyam and Dechen (1997) suggest that anger and aggression are symptomatic of feelings of weakness and fear and that anger arises when the other person involved is viewed as having more power. They wonder if we can be more fluid, flexible and gentle in how we respond to adults and young people who act in angry ways, which is:

> not about letting people walk all over us. It simply means taking responsibility for how we feel, so we can be clear how we respond rather than relying on our habitual responses (p142).

This study was indeed inspired in part by a comment made by a school leader participating in previous research involving an 'uneducable' and 'unreachable' child with autism and underlying trauma conditions (see in Burrows, 2011a) who emailed:

> Are you aware of how significantly different it is if we consider fear rather than behavior? This way of looking at behaviour of this type has the potential to be very powerful but very simple. It makes powerful connections in people that using terms like 'anger management' never will.

For Chogyam and Dechen (1997, p88) it is the practice of mindfulness that can give us the opportunity to take a different perspective, and to:

> experience ourselves, to take a look at what is going on in the context of how our habits function. You learn to take a break from over-reacting. You cease adding to your problems and come to see them more lightly.

Mindfulness

In its most common form mindfulness has come to be associated with awareness and acceptance of present moment experience with the aim of reducing an individual's stress and suffering (Kabat –Zinn, 2003). It can however also be understood as 'a spiritual awareness that is embodied and feelingful' (Stanley, 2012). This relates to the North American medicine wheel teachings (Bopp, Bopp & Lane, 1984) where emotions are seen to include being passionately involved in the world, compassion, anger at injustice, the refinement of feelings and the ability to set strong emotions aside to serve others. Mindfulness can assist in providing a space from which to observe our habitual automatic emotionally charged reactions, by bringing awareness to the present moment and helping us see that certain powerful reactions have the capacity to take hold of us and drive our behavior (Wolstenholme, 2002).

A number of researchers have shown that mindfulness can be a valuable resource for teachers to assist them to calmly respond rather than over-react to unsettling and provocative student behavior (Brown, 2002; Burrows, 2008, 2010, 2011b; Day, 2004; Franco, 2010; Jennings & Greenburg, 2009; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2010). A smaller number have discovered mindfulness can also assist teachers to cope with feelings of frustration, anger, stress, emotional imbalance, anxiety and professional ineffectiveness in relation to difficult encounters with colleagues (Brown, 2002, Burrows 2011a, 2011b; Thomas, 2010) and parents (Burrows, 2004; Cunningham, ND).

These studies have in the main have focused on disengaging from powerful emotions in order to reduce stress and decrease reactivity. This approach can lead according to Chogyam and Dechen (2002,p5) to a belief that we should 'rise above' our emotions, 'as if human feelings were some sort of spiritual disability.' Some mindfulness teachings may indeed encourage people to reject their emotional personality in favour of a 'spiritual calm' – 'a state in which the pause button has been depressed, where there is little chance of feeling anything at all (Allione, 2008).

The approach taken in this study and the case that is the focus of this paper however is to turn towards the sufferings of life and their intensity with compassion. Kornfield (2008,px) has suggested that through accepting and welcoming our emotions we can learn to 'transform their energy and find freedom in their midst.' According to Chogyam and Dechen (2002,p7) through experiencing our

emotional energies we may find that they are actually reflections of our potentialities.' In this way we are able to access the energy that is tied up in our conflicts and difficulties for our own liberation (Allione, 2008). This approach has been described an 'intelligent way to work with emotions' which for Chogyam Trungpa Rinpoche is to:

> Try to relate to their basic substance, the abstract quality of the emotion. The basic 'isness' quality of the emotions, the fundamental nature of the emotions is just energy. And if one is able to relate with energy, then the energies have no conflict with you. They become a natural process… When there is no panic involved in dealing with the emotions, then you can deal with them completely, properly. Then you are like someone who is completely skilled in their profession, who does not panic, but just does their work completely, thoroughly (as cited in Brown, 2002,p.4).

The study

As already noted above, in this paper I report on one case from face to face and on line research conducted with 25 primary schools teachers in eight Australian independent schools that built upon and extended two previous face-to-face studies conducted with mainstream school leaders and teachers in South Australia (Burrows; 2011b; 2011c). Teachers participating in professional development workshops on a mindful approach to classroom management were invited to participate over a six-week period exploring the potential of mindfulness practice and journaling to assist with a relational dilemma in the form of a student, colleague or parent at work.

This project was aimed creating a mindful, reflective and relational space to hold the teachers' personal work of experiencing, connecting with, processing and transforming powerful emotions arising in relation to their dilemma without having to enact them. Participants were asked to:

- Identify a relational dilemma that contributes to difficult encounters at work
- Give themselves and anyone involved in their dilemma a pseudonym
- Email the dilemma/case before beginning the mindfulness practices
- Practice the 'soles of the feet' meditation (Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Adkins, Singh & Singh, 2007) as formal practice at home
- Engage in a process of compassionate self -inquiry directed to what is happening in the moment, and how that moment is embodied, without becoming overly identified with critical commentary, judgment or emotions as they arise
- Practice the same meditation as informal practice at work whenever they knew they would shortly be seeing the person related to their dilemma
- Tune into the emotional sensations arising in their bodies when they thought about their dilemma or where in the presence of the person

- Take regular 'mindful' walks which involved tuning into the inner sensations of the body as they walked, gently bringing their mind back to the present moment when it wandered
- Spend 15 minute periods during which time there is no reaction to behavior if possible and safe
- Read and digest short articles on mindfulness and emotions
- Reflect in their journals on the feelings that arose in relation to their dilemma
- Email reflections weekly

Participants also received weekly email responses to their journal from the researcher to build a bridge of understanding, trust, empathy and support as they explored their emotions and reactions.

Methodology

Research into teacher professional learning in mindfulness is still new, particularly in relation to emotions and therefore requires:

> great sensitivity and a range of theoretical and methodological lens to illuminate the richness and complexity of this phenomenon (Greenberg, 2012,p162).

For this reason according to Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings (2012,p171):

> Phenomena finding investigations that use rich descriptions, case studies of exemplars, and other forms of qualitative assessment of mindfulness in education seem particularly important.

This qualitative research drew on case study (Poulter, 2009) and relational centred inquiry (Finlay & Evans, 2009) methodologies. Case study research can help to connect the worlds of the researcher and practitioner through the cultivation of dialogue as a legitimate way of building knowledge according to Poulter (2009). This understanding can forms the basis of a genuine partnership that has the capacity to produce a type of scholarship that bridges the gap between theory and practice and insight-building case studies.

Given the sensitive nature of this research, and my desire to conduct research 'with' people rather than 'on' them I decided to use relational-centred inquiry methodology for this study. Finlay and Evans (2009) suggest that it is likely that relational researchers choose subjects to study that they have already have a deep interest in and commitment to. In relational research the co-created relationship between researcher and participant is foregrounded in which the researcher seeks to build a bridge to the other, 'using our special awareness, experience, skills and knowledge' (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p3). In relational research data is seen to emerge out of an evolving, dynamic and interactional process 'as the joint product of researchers and participants (and readers) and the relationships they build' (Finlay & Evans, 2009, p6).

A significant aspect of relational research is for the researcher to ensure participants have a voice. This was a necessary element in this research since: 'How else are researchers and readers to know what a teacher knows or feels?'(James, 2007, p966). The on-line component of this study which included email conversations as a source of data collection and use of pseudonyms provided an opportunity for open-ended confidential conversations to occur to allow participants to express their views freely. The use of email as communication medium was chosen due to findings in previous research Burrows, 2011a) that the freedom offered by virtual communication in terms of time and space appears to facilitate a greater disclosure of personal and sensitive information (Memo, 2006).

Data

For this study qualitative data were made up of weekly reflective journal entries emailed to the researcher. This elicited rich descriptions that highlighted participants' professionalism, depth, sensitivity and commitment to education. Selected extracts from the journal of one participant, Jackie, year 6 teacher in a small independent school in a country area, are included below to convey gain a sense of the intensity of her experience of her dilemma and her discoveries in her own words.

October 11th, 2012. My dilemma.

'Jade' is in year 6. He lives with his aunty. He began living with her when he was 4.

His mother was a heroin addict and Jade received abusive treatment from her and her boyfriends from a very young age. As a result he suffers post traumatic stress syndrome and oppositional defiance disorder. These seem to cause slumps In energy or too much energy, erratic and aggressive behavior, attention seeking by yelling a lot and finding as many ways to disturb a class as possible, teasing where he focusses on one person over and over and then he may shift to another person when he doesn't get a reaction any more. As he has reached puberty (he is 12 already) his behaviors have escalated and become more aggressive and reactive. He has been put onto Ritalin this year, if anything I think it has made his behavior more dramatic.

I use many management tools with him except suspension as he is a unique case. I begin with counting interruptions, or asking 'What is it you are meant to be doing? I move him, send him out to the verandah, or for a run to office or to another class for an hour or so. He has filled in many management forms, we have met with him and his aunt to discuss and put in place new strategies. All work for a short time and then challenging behaviour returns. I am beginning to lose my patience quickly with him, usually getting frustrated and irritated straight away so I decided he would be a very good case study although I have more to choose from!

Over the next week Jackie began the mindfulness and reflection activities. In her second journal she wrote:

October18th, 2012

I am just beginning to realize how exhausted I am by him. This week I got a headache and stress in neck and shoulders that lasted 4 days that started over him refusing to participate and speaking in his dominating loud voice all day. I am noticing how he affects my thoughts, feelings and my body and how out of control I feel when he is angry.

It's quite interesting as I think before I was screening out his voice as a coping mechanism. Doing the mindfulness activities has made me more sensitive to what is going on in my body. When he was yelling today I felt a rush of blood go to my head and I actually felt the headache as it began.

Do you know as well I dreamt there was an inspector in my classroom and he found some dust! I think it's all getting to me somehow.

For the next three weeks Jackie practiced mindful self-inquiry though the soles of the feet meditation, walking meditation journaling activities.

October 25th, 2012

A couple of nights ago I did the mindfulness practice with some focus on relaxing the tension out of my body. I woke the next day with a deep sense of hope. I decided to do the 15 minutes of no interaction mindfulness exercise you asked us to do, with him, just observing his behaviour and not reacting. It was the longest 15 minutes ever. I noticed my urge to comment on his every action after 2 minutes. I noticed he kept looking at me for attention. I was relaxed and ignored him. After that I started standing back, watching my usual habitual thoughts instead of reacting to the content. That afternoon I began to interact with him differently and give him more space and hold back on commenting on his behaviour so much to try not to be so reactive to him and I noticed he seemed to cut back on yelling in class.

Something has shifted. Yesterday I woke without a headache, first time in 5 weeks. After the mindful walk I felt positive and inspired, ready for the day. I find I am becoming clearer in myself and when I am about to launch into my old pattern I step back and try a new tack. The space I give myself to respond helps calm my response somewhat and gives me a chance to consciously respond, not out of habit but giving a space for a new thought to come in.

I am grateful for the changes in myself as they have helped Jade also change as I'm not nagging him but speaking evenly and kindly to him which gives him the opportunity to respond differently. Jade's behaviour has improved out of sight. He is now able to change course. Jade ended the week with perfect behaviour, he worked on a pine branch, sanding and filing it smooth during his break times. He was really proud of his work. He also wrote a beautiful poem on the environment. That night I dreamt that it was snowing and I felt peaceful.

October 30th 2012.

I have realized the journal work in this project has really helped me focus my thoughts and release pent-up frustration. I think it is a valuable aspect of this mindfulness training. I haven't felt I could be really honest with my colleagues or leadership as I didn't want anyone to think I wasn't coping. I have felt embarrassed and

ashamed at times and I sense some judgment from colleagues about Jade's out there behaviour.

I now know I need to be much more aware earlier on when I am having difficulty with a student like Jade, to pause and observe where the frustration is, bring in body awareness to identify and meditate on a way of lifting the issue with a greater depth of mindfulness. I have found this allows me to feel balanced and in control of my own responses to a situation, allowing a better outcome that I feel at ease with.

In short mindfulness has made a huge difference to my responses to Jade and as a result Jade is displaying much better behaviour! The last 3 days of class he was a well-behaved student - yahoo- breakthrough!

Discussion

This case demonstrated, as have a number of others in the study, that through the experience of mindfulness and reflective practice Jackie and other teachers were able to gain new insights into challenging relationships and situations at work. Mindfulness can help teachers to engage in self-observation of their thoughts, emotions and sensations, from the safety of an inner space. Mindfulness assisted Jackie to tune into her emotions and become more accepting, fluid, flexible and able to take a fresh perspective on the situation even in the midst of complexity (Shotter, 2005). The experience of mindfulness and reflective practice showed Jackie how to begin to process and transform some of the emotions that were charged by her experience of her dilemma. This calmness was gradually communicated to Jade whose behavior changed when he sensed the change in the atmosphere around him.

Through their practices of mindfulness, reading and reflection Jackie and other teachers in this study gradually became more aware that their emotions could be an important source of information about themselves and how others were feeling (Wolstenholme, 2002). As they compassionately observed how they reacted to other people's emotional energy they could more easily understand why they acted they way they did. They were then more able to separate out whose emotions were 'in the driver's seat' and accept them with presence without feeling so overwhelmed.

It is of concern that Jackie did not seem to have the opportunity to adequately express her concerns openly at work without fear that it would be seen as a personal deficit. Teachers were generally found to have bottled up their work-related frustrations and emotions, as they lacked the time, space, skills, support or environment needed to help them transform them. Jackie like many other teachers appeared much more comfortable expressing herself in her journals to the researcher than in group settings or meetings. The stakes may simply have been too high for her and others to speak openly about their concerns.

This and previous studies I have conducted indicate that many teachers are not comfortable expressing

their emotions and indeed that much of their training may have spoken to their intellects so that while they may have read about personality and emotion this may not necessarily be very useful in the midst of a swiftly moving emotionally laden situation during an ordinary day. There are clear implications here for the introduction of mindfulness training in pre- and in-service teacher education.

Teachers and leaders in the study were generally unaware that the experience of psychological and emotional stress and trauma can lead to obsessiveness, being excessively judgmental and perfectionism, which can mean professionals and parents become critical of each other leading to breakdowns in communication, misunderstanding and defensiveness (Cairns, 2002). This was of particular concern in Jackie's case, as she appeared to be exhibiting signs of vicarious trauma as reflected in her dream about an inspector in her classroom. When teachers are encountering difficult behaviours daily such as those exhibited by Jade, deep feelings of vulnerability, brittleness and insecurity make it difficult to allow for any softness of response. Jackie felt fragile and exposed until she experienced the support of her mindfulness practice, reflective journaling and supportive responses from the researcher. It is worth noting at this point that according to Teasdale, developer of Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Behaviour Therapy (see Segal, Williams and Teasdale, 2002) an individual's mental health is related to his or her ability to flexibly move from one way of being or doing to another based on the conditions in the environment.

There was little support for Jackie from leaders or colleagues who could potentially have helped her see her situation from a more multi-dimensional perspective and she was aware of her isolation, which compounded the situation. The potential role of mindfulness in supporting colleagues through stressful times as a preventative and proactive human resources strategy does not appear to be appreciated. While a situation may originally arise in relation to one teacher, leader, student or parent it can rapidly become more complex with ripple effects right through the school if not addressed proactively. While it is important for teachers to be able to provide a container for their students' emotions so they do not build up to reach boiling point, they in turn need to have their powerful emotions contained by their leaders and the school, sector or system as a whole (Hanko, 2006).

If teachers are to be able to deal with high levels of stress and relational complexity they may need more support from their colleagues, leaders and organization in the form of compassionate listening, empathy, counseling, mediation and professional development to assist in dealing with difficult encounters and conflicts with students, colleagues and parents. Jackie and other teachers and leaders in the study working with students with trauma-related conditions would be also likely benefit from access to specialized professional development in the effects of trauma on learning, behavior, attachment and wellbeing.

Limitations of the study

Although the results of this study are promising and align with and extend previous research findings this exploratory project involved a relatively small number of participants over a short time period. No information is currently available as to the sustainability of the findings from this small study. While the practice of mindfulness and journaling has been shown to have positive outcomes for the participants of the study it needs to be acknowledged that a contribution to the success of the project may be related in part to the background of the researcher who had her personal mindfulness practice and was a trained counsellor as well as educational consultant with a background in students with special needs and trauma-related behavior difficulties. For McCown, Reibel and Micotti (2010) it is essential to have a mindfulness guide who authentically embodies the spirit or essence of the practices being taught which may be difficult to access for other professional learning projects.

It is also possible that the positive findings may also be due in part to Jackie and other teachers joining the project because they were already experiencing difficulties and were ready for assistance. These participants could have been at a turning point, and in this way as Hick and Furlotte (2009, p22) suggest the mindfulness work may have 'fed into a dynamic that was already occurring in their lives'.

Conclusion

As noted by Roeser et al (2012) mindfulness training and teachers' professional development is an emerging area of research and practice. This exploratory study supports previous research findings that professional learning is most effective when it addresses issues identified by teachers, and is situated in relationships and contexts that support teacher learning (Day, 2004, Kitchen, 2010; Webster-Wright, 2009). It has highlighted the value of mindfulness and reflective practice as a form of tailored professional development, involving a process of self- knowledge and gaining a new understanding grounded in body, emotions and senses at work.

It has shown that mindfulness and reflective practice can assist teachers to begin to 'embrace emotions as the path' (Chogyam & Dechen, 2002,p3) and pause, reflect, respond and act from awareness rather than reacting impulsively to emotional charges and triggers. Taking time to slow down, be present and observe thoughts and feelings from a mindful space without needing to react had a powerful effect on Jackie and other participants' equanimity, wellbeing and sense of self-agency. In this way she and others were able to calmly transmit mindfulness into the learning space for the benefit of all. In this particular case mindfulness was shown to assist Jackie to respond with flexibility and compassion to her own emotional energy and that of Jade, a student with a trauma-related condition, based on the conditions of the environment.

There is a need for more research to be conducted in this area but it is heartening to know that:

> *This work is truly valuable in making changes in behavior management for encouraging teachers to recognize their own part that they play in the behavior issues that they have in their classes.*
>
> (from Jackie's final journal, 2012)

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