

Does mindfulness have a place in a Christian school? One school's experience and reflections

Bree Hills

Canberra Christian School, Canberra ACT
principal@ccs.act.edu.au

Key words: Mindfulness, Christian mindfulness, wellbeing, mental health, preventative programs, attention, focus

Introduction

It is a typical classroom in an Australian primary school. The children are not at their desks. They are lying on the floor with their eyes closed. Their teacher is guiding them through a mindfulness exercise. This is a trend that is growing in popularity as schools search out ways to address the mental health issues that are increasingly impacting the lives of Australian children in negative ways.

Wellbeing and mental health of school age children have become a priority in the recent years. The challenges facing children in the twenty-first century have a variety of implications on their mental health and wellbeing. Unfortunately with the current Australian Curriculum requirements, our schools' time and resources are restricted in what they can allocate to the development of children's social, emotional and spiritual wellbeing. However, with current research identifying teachers and schools as key to the identification and prevention of mental health and wellbeing disorders, schools are increasingly taking a proactive role in students' wellbeing by using positive interventions. Mindfulness is one strategy that is gaining popularity in schools with evidence of positive results for children. In this context, Canberra Christian School decided to explore the idea of Christian mindfulness, its differences to secular mindfulness, and what benefits it may bring to a Christian school.

Children and mental health

Children today live in a world that is rapidly changing, developing and growing at an extremely fast pace (Kurzweil, 2005, p. 22). Sandstorm and Huerta (2013) demonstrate how this rapid change to family structures, technologies and academic requirements

places children in a challenging and stressful age and has a significant impact on their mental wellbeing.

Thornton (2011, p. 9) proposes that "an individual's mental wellbeing, whether they are an infant, child, adolescent or adult, significantly influences their ability to function in and with society". Therefore, it is very important for each child to develop a positive/ healthy mental wellbeing to successfully face today's personal and social challenges. Mental health and wellbeing is defined by Wallace (2011, p. 4) as "the achievement of expected developmental milestones and the establishment of effective coping skills, secure attachments, and positive social relationships." With this definition in mind it is important to understand the challenges that children face if they have poor mental health.

In 2015 the Department of Health in Canberra completed one of the largest Australian studies into children's mental health, The Mental Health of Children and Adolescents Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing. This report provides a comprehensive picture of the major mental health and wellbeing issues that affect children today. The report states that "one in seven (13.9%) 4-17 year-olds was assessed as having mental disorders in the previous twelve months. This is equivalent to 560,000 Australian children and adolescents" (Lawrence, et al., 2015, p. 4). These mental health issues encompass areas of depression, ADHD, anxiety and emotional/ behavioral problems. According to Lawrence et al. (2015) and Wallace (2011) the percentage of children facing mental health disorders has remained arguably static for the past ten years; however, the way in which mental health and wellbeing are addressed and supported has changed significantly. Schools, for example, have been clearly identified as on-the-front-line to identify and address these mental health challenges for children through their social and personal development (Thornton, 2011 p. 13);

Schools are increasing taking a proactive role in students' wellbeing. ... Mindfulness is one strategy ... with evidence of positive results

however, schools' and teachers' ability to support children in this area is limited due to curriculum requirements and an already overcrowded school timetable.

One voice speaking in favour of a more accommodating curriculum is Masters (2015), who criticizes the practice of teaching subjects in isolation with a focus on academic achievement. This he claims, reduces time available for the social, spiritual and personal development of each child. Faull (2012) agrees, adding that pastoral care in these areas is insufficient. This is a concern as it is "critically important to detect and treat mental challenges as early as possible in order to reduce the impact they can have on children during key developmental stages of their lives" (Telethon Kids Institute, 2015, p. 5). With the growing academic requirements outlined in the Australian Curriculum teachers are already struggling to find time for all of the learning, activities and assessments for each subject.

In the midst of this mental health epidemic, where problems, left unnoticed and untreated, can considerably "change the course of a child's entire life" (Telethon Kids Institute, 2015, p. 5), it is important to consider the best way to address these issues. A paradigm shift from addressing the symptoms to preventing the causes is supported by Graetz et al. (2008, p. 14) who reinforce that "intervening early to prevent or lessen the impact of mental health difficulties can result in enormous benefits to the child and family which are often sustained over time".

With the shift to preventative programs in schools there have been a large variety of approaches developed to specifically focus on children's personal, social and mental wellbeing within the confines of the school curriculum and timetable. Whole school programs with outcomes to develop students' social and emotional skills are being implemented in a range of schools (Graetz et al, 2008). One of the classroom-based skills programs gaining attention in this area is the practice of mindfulness. Mindfulness is a program approach "that is being used with increased frequency and receiving mainstream acceptance around the world as a means to enhance both students' and teachers' wellbeing" (Albrecht, Albrecht, Patricia, Cohen, & Marc, 2012, p. 2).

Mindfulness in schools

Mindfulness is a form of meditation that focuses on being acutely aware of one's emotions and feelings and focusing on the inner self. It includes activities such as regulated breathing and guided imagery. Research identifies the following benefits of mindfulness: calmness, reduced stress and lowered anxiety levels (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Rix & Bernay, 2014; Volanen, et al., 2016). Salzman and

Goldin (2008, p. 155) add to this list with "improved attention and emotional reactivity" and improvements in some areas of meta-cognition. Unfortunately the majority of the research supporting mindfulness in schools focuses on secular schools and is devoid of any religious connection. There is some current research that alludes to spirituality in mindfulness (St. Clair, 2016), and conversely, research into ensuring there is no religious connection with mindfulness (Jennings, 2016). However, there is very limited research in relation to mindfulness in Christian schools as well as Christian focused mindfulness techniques suitable for using with children.

What is Christian Mindfulness?

The concept of mindfulness appears to divide Christians. Many Christians avoid mindfulness practices and believe there is no place for applying mindfulness in Christian schools. Their reasoning is that mindfulness requires children to empty their mind and focus internally. This practice is confirmed in Kabat-Zinn's (2003) definition of mindfulness as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (p. 145). This secular definition is used as the foundation of many school based mindfulness preventative programs. Other Christians embrace mindfulness practices with no thought as to whether its core premise aligns with Christian beliefs.

Taking an approach closer to Calhoun's (2005, p. 114) which defines Christian mindfulness as "a state of active, open, nonjudgmental attention", what sets Christian mindfulness apart is where the focus lies. The focus is not on self or even on emptying the mind of self, but on God. Children are encouraged to direct their attention to God and fill their minds with thoughts of God. Christian mindfulness does not ask children to empty their minds but asks them to think and meditate on "God's Word, praying and asking God to give understanding by the Spirit, who has promised to lead us 'into all truth' (John 16:13)" (Koranteng-Pipim, 2009, para. 27). White (1892, p. 106) highlights the importance of the techniques of active meditation, focused thought and prayer. She explains that "meditating upon Him [God] elevates the soul and quickens the affections". The focus of Christian mindfulness is on an awareness of God and individuals' relationships with Him. Its key practices leads to attitudes of trust, acceptance and compassion towards self and others, and gratitude for the gift of God's grace (Smith, 2017). Finley (2012, n.p.) agrees, stating that Christian meditation "is always rooted in God's word, His works, and His ways; and anchored in His character, majesty, love and power." He states that biblical meditation is active, not passive, and outward,

“
Christian
mindfulness ...
[is] a state of
active, open,
nonjudgmental
attention ...
where the
focus lies ...
on God”

not inward looking. “Christian meditation thus focuses our thoughts on the grandeur and greatness of God, lifting us from what is around us and within us to what is above us” (Finley, 2012, n.p.) Therefore, although the practices used for Christian mindfulness are similar in technique to secular mindfulness, they are very different in focus and attention, and as we planned our techniques, we were very intentional about making God the focus of each session.

How we implemented Christian Mindfulness

At Canberra Christian School we asked ourselves the question, Could we create a Christian mindfulness program as part of our wellbeing program? We decide we could, and we called our program, “*Your Mind Matters – Attention and Focus for the Christian Classroom*”. Initially, we trialed a daily ten minute session in two classes for ten weeks. Our aim was for children to access the benefits of attention and focus (mindfulness) practices in the secure context of Christian beliefs. Each practice and technique encouraged students to pay attention to their environment and reflect on the amazing world God has created for them as well their personal relationship with Him. We also created a poster that acted as a visual reminder to teachers and students where the focus for this program lay (see Figure 1).

Through this preventative mindfulness program the children learnt about and practiced techniques from the following areas (see Figure 1).

- God gave me Five Senses. These strategies allowed students to explore their feelings, emotions and connection to God through their senses.
- God gave me Friends and Family. These strategies focused on relationships with an emphasis on gratitude to God.
- God gave me Strength to Choose. These strategies focused on behaviour and making good choices.

This is what our Christian mindfulness program looked like. Each day, the grades 3-6 teachers led a ten minute session with their class which focused on one of the key areas from Figure 1. All of these were quiet time activities, but not all were restricted to the classroom. Each teacher chose a Christian mindfulness activity from a broad range of mindfulness activities we developed, and which were intentionally linked to God.

Christian mindfulness activities in the category of *God gave me 5 senses* included, for example, breathing exercises, nature walks, focused listening and a 5 five senses snack. In the group *God gave me friends and family*, children participated in a gratitude

photo activity and other Christian mindfulness strategies designed to raise awareness of the special people God has placed in their lives. Resources including glitter jars and colouring sheets were used along with a prepared script to encourage children to focus on the area *God gave me strength to choose*.

What we observed

At the end of the ten week period this is what we observed.

We observed a change in our classrooms to a calmer atmosphere.

Teachers commented that this was especially highlighted in the hour or so after the ‘focus technique of the day’ was completed. We also noticed that students came to enjoy their quiet time.

We observed a change of perception towards Christian mindfulness.

Both teachers and students went on a journey as we introduced the ten minute sessions. One participating teacher, on commencement of the program, had significant reservations about the appropriateness and usefulness of such a program as ‘Your Mind Matters’. Her perception and understanding changed markedly by the completion of the ten week program with her stating, “*I think this term has been great for learning about Christian Mindfulness. I’m looking forward to achieving more with Christian Mindfulness next term.*”

We observed increasing engagement in Christian Mindfulness.

It was a hesitant start for both the teachers and students; however, after the first three fundamental lessons both the teachers and students were very keen to participate each day. There were two key students who struggled to engage with some of the techniques, which was insightful for the teacher as this allowed her to follow up separately and discuss any concerns the students were having. Overall, teachers remarked how engaged their students were. One student commented, “*The Christian Mindfulness program has been a wonderful blessing. I have been able to wind down in the middle of the day and let my body and mind focus on God*” while another offered the opinion that “*Christian Mindfulness is interesting and I think it’s about paying attention to the small good things and thanking God for them.*”

We observed increased awareness of feelings, emotions and relationships.

Both teachers and students highlighted increased awareness in the identification of emotions and feelings; however, teachers soon realised that some

“
At the end of
the ten week
period ...
We observed
a change
in our
classrooms
to a calmer
atmosphere.
”

students were unable to clearly understand the impact and meaning of their emotions (specifically anger and pain). We observed that the program helped students identify their feelings and the feelings of others; however, this knowledge did not always translate to better relationships unless the meaning and impact of the feeling or emotion was explored. Overall we observed a positive increase in how students engaged with each other, resolved conflict and related emotionally. This is now an area

of further investigation for both the program and the wellbeing curriculum of the school.

We observed an increase in students' ability to refocus their attention.

When our students actively used the Christian Mindfulness techniques, there was a clear improvement in their ability to refocus their attention positively. However, it was interesting to note that during the ten weeks' trial period the techniques had

“Overall we observed a positive increase in how students engaged with each other, resolved conflict and related emotionally.”



Figure 1: Visual poster created by author for classroom use

not transferred into daily practice yet, as children did not use them outside of the allotted program time unless encouraged to by the teacher.

We observed a positive connection between the program and our overall focus on God.

Our teachers and students were very positive about the impact of focusing on God throughout the program. Teachers describe a heightened sense of gratitude for what God had created as well as for the people he has provided in our lives. A student said, “*I really like Christian Mindfulness because you get to be calm and reflect on the day and remember why we should be grateful to God*” while another felt that “*It really helps you notice and think about your thoughts and feelings and how they can change your whole opinion, also how you can ask God to help you do that.*”

What we learnt

The implementation of a Christian Mindfulness program in Canberra Christian school provided an interesting window into its potential for the support of positive mental health in a Christian classroom. We observed that attention refocus and class calmness improved. This was similar to the findings in secular mindfulness investigations (Jennings, 2016, p.176; Volanen et al., 2016). We learnt that for children to internalize these techniques and use them outside of the classroom, the program needs to be ongoing. We recognise that how we ran our program and what we discovered may not be transferable to all schools, but encourage other Christian schools to create or adapt their own Christian mindfulness activities, rather than follow a humanistic program which directs each child's attention to their inner self. By doing this we discovered that our students could benefit from the positive impact of mindfulness and focus on God's goodness, His word and His works as the source of well-being.

NOTE

If you are interested in learning more about Canberra Christian's School's 'Your Mind Matters' program and would like access to the Christian mindfulness activities they use, please go to the website www.ccs.act.edu.au/your-mind-matters/ or contact Bree Hills at principal@ccs.act.edu.au. **TEACH**

References

- Albrecht, N. J., Albrecht, P. M., & Cohen, M. (2012). Mindfully teaching in the classroom: A literature review. *Australian Journal of Teacher Education*, 37(12), Article 1.
- Calhoun, A. A., (2005). *Spiritual disciplines handbook: Practices that transform us*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press.
- Faull, A. (2012). The Australian Curriculum: A look through the lens of Christian education. *TEACH Journal of Christian Education*, 4(2), 8-13.
- Finley, M. A. (2012). Biblical spirituality: Rediscovering our biblical

- roots, or embracing the East? *Adventist Review*, 1523. Retrieved on November 8, 2018 from <http://archives.adventistreview.org/article/5615/archives/issue-2012-1523/biblical-spirituality>
- Graetz, B., Littlefield, L., Trinder, M., Dobia, B., Souter, M., Champion, C., Boucher, S., Killic-Moran, C. & Cummins, R. (2008). KidsMatter: A population health model to support student mental health and well-being in primary schools. *International Journal of Mental Health Promotion*, 10, 13–20.
- Greenberg, M. T., & Harris, A. R. (2012). Nurturing mindfulness in children and youth: Current state of research. *Child Development Perspectives*, 6(2), 161-166.
- Jennings, P. A. (2016). Mindfulness-based programs and the American public school system: Recommendations for best practices to ensure secularism. *Mindfulness*, 7, 176–178.
- Kurzweil, R. (2005). *The singularity is near*. New York, NY: Viking Penguin.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: Past, present, and future. *Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice*, 10, 144-156.
- Koranteng-Pipim, S. (2009). Trojan horses: The new spirituality movements. *Adventists Affirm*, 23 (3). Retrieved from <https://www.adventistsaffirm.org/previous-issues/volume-23-number-3/trojan-horses-the-new-spirituality-movements>
- Lawrence, D., Johnson, S., Hafekost, J., Boterhoven, De Haan, K., Sawyer, M., Ainley, J., & Zubrick, S. R. (2015). *The mental health of children and adolescents. Report on the second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Department of Health, Canberra, Australia.
- Masters, G. (2015). 'Big five' challenges in school education. Retrieved from <http://www.teachermagazine.com.au>. Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Rix, G., & Bernay, R. (2014). A study of the effects of mindfulness in five primary schools in New Zealand. *New Zealand Journal of Teachers' Work*, 11(2), 201- 220.
- Saltzman, A., & Goldin, P. (2008). Mindfulness-based stress reduction for school-age children. In L. A. Greco & S. C. Hayes (Eds.), *Acceptance and mindfulness treatments for children and adolescents: A practitioner's guide* (pp. 139-161). Oakland, CA: New Harbinger.
- Smith, Y. (2017). Christian contemplation in schools – Christian Contemplation Curriculum. Presbyterian Church Schools Resource Office. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/contemplationcurriculum/home>.
- Telethon Kids Institute. (2015). *Young minds matter: The second Australian Child and Adolescent Survey of Mental Health and Wellbeing*. Department of Health, Canberra. Overview of the first child and adolescent survey.
- Volanen, S., Lassander, M., Hankonen, N., Santalahti, P., Hintsanen, M., Simonsen, N., Raevuori, A., Mullola, S., Vahlberg, T., But, A., & Suominen, S. (2016). Healthy learning mind - A school-based mindfulness and relaxation program. *BMC Psychology*, 4(1), 35. doi: 10.1186/s40359-016-0142-3
- Thornton, S. (2011). *Supporting children's mental well-being in primary schools: Problem-solving through communication and action*. PhD thesis, Southern Cross University, Lismore, Australia.
- Wallace, A. (2011). *The psychological and emotional well-being of children and young people: Models of effective practice in educational settings*. Prepared for the Department of Education and Communities. Sydney, Australia: Urbis.
- White, E.G. (1892). *Gospel workers*. Battle Creek, MI: Review and Herald.

Author information

Bree Hills graduated with a Bachelor of Education, with a major in Information Technology, from the University of Canberra. After teaching in the primary classroom for many years she then studied design, production and project management and applied those skills in her role as an adult educator for government, commercial and industrial personnel. Bree has completed five years in her current role as principal and is currently studying her Masters of Education.

“when our students actively used the Christian Mindfulness techniques, there was a clear improvement in their ability to refocus their attention positively.”