MINDFULNESS – A CULTURAL PARADIGM FOR TEACHERS

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Abstract. *Mindfulness is to live at the present moment and to free the mind from the usual ruminative habits that lead to worry, depression and exhaustion and allow more intuitive and creative answers to the new challenges. Most teacher training primarily focuses on content and pedagogy, going beyond the very real social, emotional and cognitive requirements of teaching itself. The paper attempts to demonstrate that learning and cultivating mindfulness skills - the ability to remain focused on current experience through non-judging awareness - can help us promote the calm, relaxed but refreshing environment that students have to learn. Mindfulness can also help us to be more effective in reducing conflicts and developing more positive ways to relate them to the classroom, which can help us feel more satisfaction with the workplace.*

Keywords: *mindfulness, awareness, attention, interconnectivity*

"Be the change that you wish to see in the world." ― Mahatma Gandhi

We live and carry on our existence in an extremely busy and active society. We have increasingly demanding jobs, we are daily subjected to day-to-day stress and external pressures, and we often fail to fight effectively to deal with.

Mental health experts come with alarming prognoses and talk about the importance of exploring inner feelings and emotions, especially as more and more research has demonstrated the link between physical illness and mental suffering. In this sense, it is not surprising the ever more obvious effort to find ways to focus more attention on our own person. What does mindfulness meditation mean? Mindfulness even refers to such a way of connecting to oneself. The concept is taken from the ancient techniques of Buddhist meditation, but today it is a technique of intentional concentration of attention on the present moment and the acceptance, without judgment, of the thoughts, emotions and sensations that define us.

Mindfulness is a state of special consciousness that involves awareness and acceptance of what is happening at the present moment. You can consider it a state of "fullness of mind," because you bring your full, undivided attention right now. The word mindfulness has been used in various contemplative traditions to designate very specific types of states and meditative practices. For the purposes of this paper, I use the generic term. It is a purely secular approach, based on the most current science.

The practice of mindfulness means to monitor your experience in real time in an impartial way (Kabat-Zinn). When you experience full awareness, you are fully aware of what is happening here and now, instead of lingering on the past with thoughts such as "I hope that students understood the notions I taught yesterday" or worry about the future, feeding thoughts like "What am I doing with this student?".

Mindfulness involves three fundamental processes: intention formation, attention and attitude adaptation (Shapiro Carlson, Astin, Freedman). The act of practicing mindfulness is deliberate: it has finality. We focus our attention on this moment and participate in it with acceptance, care and discernment. Mindfulness also means "wholeheartedly" because it promotes a perception of the world that reminds us of its intrinsic goodness and beauty.

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Intrapersonal Mindfulness

The term *mindfulness* can be used to indicate both a mood, a feature or a more lasting personal mood. Although the research suggests that some people are more conscious by birth than others (Brown, Ryan), it has also been demonstrated that in time and through practice the state of mindfulness can become more accessible and more systematic in nature.

There is also evidence that the practice of full awareness is associated with beneficial changes in the brain, capable of supporting self-regulation. Through practice, we can strengthen our ability to incorporate full attention into our daily lives until it becomes a mental habituation.

Full awareness can be practiced in various formal and informal ways. Its formal practices include forms of static meditation and contemplative activities such as yoga and tai chi, a Chinese martial art that involves a series of slow, conscious movements.

The two basic types of static meditation practice are concentrated attention and open monitoring. Concentrated attention involves applying full awareness to a particular target - for example, breathing - and the effort to keep your attention focused on the target. Open monitoring involves the open and impartial surveillance of the content of the experience from one moment to the next.

Full awareness can also be practiced informally in day-to-day activities. At any time, you can add full awareness to the richness of your present experience, in all its dimensions: external sounds, objects, other people or animals, as well as inner thoughts, sensations and inner feelings.

Practicing full informal awareness involves flexible application of attention, awareness and acceptance. It is a kind of "metaconcentration" in which you notice everything in consciousness, like a viewer watching a movie, and adopt an attitude of accepting everything that is happening.

As an example, imagine that you stay calm on the shore of a beautiful river and focus your attention on the waves of water. Notice the passing boats, but do not focus on them. Then there is a big, beautiful, and festive craft. There is music, and people dance on deck. The fun is all. Soon, your mind leaves the quay and gets on the boat, wondering where it comes from and where it's heading. Then, as if awakening from a dream, you suddenly realize that the boat distracted you and return to the bank of the river to focus again on the waves.

So is the practice of full awareness. When your mind wanders in disturbing thoughts about the future or the past and you are no longer present here and now, you realize this and consciously bring your attention back to the present moment. This sequence - consisting of deliberately engaging consciousness at the present moment, distracting, observing distraction, and bringing attention now - is in itself the practice of full awareness.

Just as physical exercise produces strength, flexibility and strength in the body, the practice of full awareness produces cognitive and emotional skills that cultivate inner strength, resilience, sense of purpose, and the ability to learn and adapt flexibly to changes and life challenges.

Interpersonal Mindfulness

Previously, I described intrapersonal mindfulness: the present and impartial awareness of internal processes, including thoughts, feelings and bodily sensations. The practice of mindfulness can also be applied to the way we relate to others: this is interpersonal mindfulness.

The definition involves developing and practicing the following components:
- Listening to others with full attention

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- Contemptuous awareness of the emotions felt by you and others during interactions
- Openness and receptivity to the thoughts and emotions of others, as well as acceptance of those thoughts and feelings
- self-regulation: Low emotional and behavioral reactivity and reduced automatism in reactions to the daily behavior of others
- Compassion for you and others

Full awareness involves a sense of connection: Here is the central axiom of the sapiential traditions from which a secular approach to what we call mindfulness is - the recognition that as human beings, we are essentially identical and we must take care of each other to survive and thrive. Recognition of this fact promotes a deep sense of respect and compassion towards others and the desire to relieve *suffering.*

Positive Effects of Practicing Mindfulness

Psychologists are increasingly using interventions based on mindfulness to successfully ease a variety of mental and physical affections. For more than 25 years, researchers have studied the effects of these interventions, and interest has grown dramatically over the past decade as promising research results have become more known.

The most studied intervention based on mindfulness is the Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, the founder of the Mindfulness Center (Kabat-Zin). Kabat-Zin began his work several decades ago, applying the practice of mindfulness meditation to help people deal with conditions that traditional medicine could not cure, such as chronic pain. Numerous rigorous studies have found that PRSM reduces stress, favors well-being, makes psychological functioning more adaptable and enriches cognitive functions, including attentive skills (Chiesa, Calati, Serretti and Kov, Smoki, Robins).

Furthermore, mindfulness interventions enrich the psychological adjustment processes, which serve as a shock absorber against psychological suffering, promote resilience (Jimenez, Niles & Park) and enrich body sensibility, improving emotion regulation (Desbordes et al.) . Other benefits include increased mood, empathy, and immune function; reducing stress and anxiety; a lesser incidence of relapses after antidepressant treatment, and a decrease in substance abuse (Chiesa, Serretti and Davidson et al., Ma, Teasdale and Ostafin, Marlatt, Shapiro, Brown, Beigel).

Interferences based on mindfulness also favor cognitive flexibility and self-reflection. In this way, they can help teachers overcome the tendency of emotional reactivity in response to the student's behavior, which contributes to emotional exhaustion and the appearance of overwhelming (Chand and Jennings, Greenberg).

Focusing attention and open awareness can have different effects on cognitive functions associated with creativity. One study found that open awareness promotes divergent thinking. This type of thinking facilitates the generation and consideration of more and more decisive ideas and solutions in situations requiring a high degree of creativity.

Recent research has shown that the MBSR promotes significant changes in the brain structure associated with learning and memory enhancement processes, emotional regulation, self-referential processing and perspective adoption, all of which are essential skills for effective teaching and learning.

We are still not sure why programs and therapies based on mindfulness are so useful. One possible explanation would be that, by practicing awareness in this way, we strengthen the connections between the prefrontal cortex and the limbic system of the brain and as a result we become more able to use our executive functions to overcome emotional reactivity. This can promote a process of decentralization through which we are able to distance

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ourselves psychologically and observe our thoughts and feelings by not letting them take control (Feldman, Greeson, Senville). A greater detachment from disturbing thoughts and feelings makes it easier for us to perceive them only as thoughts and feelings, not as decisive realities that require all our attention.

When we experience suffering, we become "stressed", we tend to be irritable and have automatic reactions that we may not be aware of. The tone of our voice becomes harsh. We overreact. As we resort to mindfulness in our experiences of life, we become more aware of our own reactivity and perceive the trigger factors that take us out of decentralized (in a good sense), conscious, more tolerant states. In other words, by practicing full awareness, we are able to take things less personally, interrupt the cycles of negative reactivity, increase our attention, and address problem solving more effectively (Safran, Segal).

Over the past decade, researchers have called attention to interventions based on mindfulness, exploring whether they could provide the skills that teachers need to effectively manage stress and to create and sustain stimulating learning environments at the social and emotional level. Exploration has started from the idea that formal practices of full awareness could generally be beneficial to people working in support professions.

Mindfulness and the teaching process

The state of interpersonal mindfulness and intrapersonal mindfulness can play an important role in effective teaching. Full awareness and conscious behavior help us maintain calmness, compassion and sensitivity to the needs and interests of students, while creating the resilience needed to maintain well-being in a highly demanding work environment.

Practicing full awareness during teaching helps us manage proactively the class. We notice when students are about to bother with time and can take an attitude to prevent problems. To be aware of what is happening at every moment in the classroom and at the same time to respond to the individual needs of the students, we must be able to shift our attention from the whole class to one student and vice versa, casually and regularly. This requires a high degree of attention flexibility, flexibility which we can be achieved by regularly involving ourselves in full awareness practices.

Simultaneously, we have to process an avalanche of emotionally loaded information. Normally, we monitor and manage the conflicting situations that occur in a course room.

It is not easy to describe and explain the rapid and profound transformations that are taking place in society and that are reflected in the academic world. Symptoms of discomfort, disappointment, and tiredness indicate that something has broken in the generational exchange; some balances that had lasted for many decades have skipped. There is an ever-increasing inadequacy between our fractioned knowledge, divided into disciplines on the one hand, and increasingly transversal, multidimensional, global realities or problems.

It is precisely our living in a complex society that requires a continuous revision of education and knowledge. It is no longer enough just to know; essential is to have essential and lasting knowledge, skills, strategies that can make us understand the world in which we live, increasingly complex and constantly developing. This is the request that students turn to the school.

The experience of learning is the foundation of the scholastic experience, but it loses its meaning if there is no integration between the knowledge able to direct the behaviors. Education and knowledge become effective and persistent only if they are proposed in such a way that the learners are involved, they understand the importance of building their own existential project.

The school, used as a generic term, often tends to exacerbate abstract and bookish learning; but learning takes place in addition to intellectual and social and emotional aspects.

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Learning means change, change the way of thinking, acting and being. Real learning involves sharing what leads students to take a stand, to build their own point of view.

Life is made of continuous learning; many occur spontaneously, almost unconscious, while others occur in a structured and sequential manner. The scholastic one is an intentional learning, rigorously articulated in well-defined times and spaces. It is the result of a multiplicity of actors (teachers, students, learning environments, institutions, territory) whose synergy determines the greater or lesser success.

Increasingly, social problems are posed to the school, needs that students bring to school because they do not find adequate answers in the family. Many times the school seems impotent in the face of these demands, and is not able to interpret and direct change. It cannot give students an idea of themselves; it cannot be a welcoming place in which to recognize oneself, a place of awareness in which everyone with his own individuality and his own network of family, social and cultural relationships is stimulated and supported in the search for meaning of his own thinking and acting.

To respond to this delicate and burdensome task, there is a need for a school committed to a broad front, a school whose objectives are not just about education and able to overcome that traditional approach that opposes cognitive development to social and cultural emotional development and that distinguishes and separates instruction from education.

It is a perspective that revolutionizes both the educational and educational activities of the school. Including in the educational path a complex of skills such as self-control, conflict management, autonomy, means recognizing the student in his identity, in his baggage of skills and in the personal style of learning; it means giving him self-esteem making him the protagonist of his own learning path.

What can the school do to promote integrated student learning that takes into account the various aspects: intellectual, social, emotional? In which areas is it possible to act to facilitate the direct assumption of responsibility on the part of the students in the learning process?

The place where the student lives most of his school experience is the class, understood as a physical place, but also and above all relational and psychological. The teacher plays a decisive role in determining a particular "climate"; it seems certain that teachers who can create the most favorable situations for learning "(...) are warm, friendly, willing to help, communicative but, at the same time, tidy, able to motivate and control behavior in the classroom". The educational climate of schools is a crucial variable for the success of educational action; the individualistic and selective approach is totally inadequate for the achievement of positive results; the good teacher is not the only one who knows how to "keep the discipline" and keep the boys "in their place" but it is the one that manages to establish a democratic climate, that is, centered on dialogue, mutual acceptance, the enhancement of differences, on tolerance, consent, cooperation.

The recognition of a multiplicity of educational paths makes alternative models to classroom teaching indispensable; temporary groups of students can be formed working on the same area of skills. Networking can also be an alternative to the frontal lesson. These modalities challenge the traditional approach because they bring emotional and social components into play. Cooperative learning strategies enhance affective and social dynamics among students and between teachers and students; acquiring and building knowledge is an active social process that students must be able to practice. There is a collective intelligence: beyond the individual there are interactions between people, resources and materials to think, the tools to know, to learn, to solve problems. This is why the learning environment is the initial condition for the growth of the person.

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Jon Kabat-Zinn (2009) wrote a lot about the importance of developing the beginner's mind:

> Too often we let our thinking and our beliefs about what we "know" prevent us from seeing things as they really are…An open, "beginner's" mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in a rut of our expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does (Kabat-Zinn 35).

Therefore, embarking on a university path not only creates an increase in stress levels and an increase in the number of challenges young adults face, but through the use of programs based on contemplative practices, can be offered to students the opportunity to learn more functional and effective behaviors in the new context and to acquire skills for stress management (Foureur et al.). Mindfulness allows one to recognize one's feelings, to manage and "normalize" the stress and challenges encountered by the student during the transition from higher education to university. Moreover, the effectiveness of contemplative practices on the well-being of university students can be found in positive correlations between practicing meditation and healthy lifestyles. Research carried out by Murphy et al. (2012), for example, found, through self-report questionnaires of 441 women enrolled in college, how higher levels of awareness were related to healthier eating, better sleep quality, and physical health.

Caldwell, Emery, Harrison, and Greeson (2011) found that college students who had attended Taijiquan sessions, compared to a control group, reported improvement in the quality of sleep, mood, and stress perception.

Another factor of considerable importance in the educational context, which has acquired a growing interest in the last decades, is the ability of the various institutions to offer programs that encourage the regulation of emotions. Mindfulness has proved to be a particularly valid means for the development of the capacity for recognition and management of emotions and its use in educational contexts is growing rapidly. In fact, studies conducted with university students show that higher levels of awareness are associated with greater activity of the areas of the brain responsible for the regulation of emotions, in particular, the labeling of a stimulus as emotionally threatening or not. Having better control of one's emotional states, in an educational context, brings benefits both on academic performance and reduces counterproductive behavior. The latter, in particular, consisting for example in plagiarism, fraud or absenteeism, are generated by anger, anxiety and fear, affective states negatively correlated with levels of greater awareness. Among the studies examining the relationship between mindfulness and counterproductive behaviors, of particular interest are the research conducted by Schwager, Hülsheger, Lang (2015) carried out on 281 students enrolled in five different faculties of a Dutch university. Moreover, the scholars have investigated the moderating role of three personality characteristics, such as conscientiousness, honesty and humility, considered as predictors of unsuitable behavior, in the relationship between certain levels of awareness and counterproductive behavior. The results show the negative correlation between high levels of awareness, conscientiousness, honesty and the implementation of negative behaviors. The authors argue that the beneficial effects of mindfulness could be explained through its development of the ability to label negative feelings, which in turn would reduce the intensity of emotion and, therefore, the likelihood of engaging in non-adaptive behavior as an answer to it. Furthermore, it should be noted that regardless of the degree of awareness, high levels of personality characteristics studied are inversely proportional to having counterproductive behavior. These findings are in line with previous studies on the positive effects of greater mental presence in students,

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whose benefits extend to academic behavior. Mindfulness helps students to adjust their affective states (Hülsheger et al.) and to perceive situations as less stressful and threatening. This allows in university performances and not only a better control of anxiety, greater concentration and commitment. Students, on the other hand, with a low level of awareness, are worried about issues related to the past and the future, which deprives them of important resources, triggering negative affective reactions. Various studies on young adults have revealed minor reports of emotional dysregulation and a tendency to be less reactive after interventions using mindfulness. Moreover, the latter allows the increase of emotional awareness and the ability to describe subtle differences between various moods. High levels of awareness have been linked to a greater ability to differentiate both positive and negative emotions.

The effectiveness of mindfulness in helping university students in emotional regulation has been found on a scientific level. Increasing the capacity for recognition and management of emotions also reduces the tendency of students to engage in counterproductive behavior.

By extending a formal practice of awareness into a dharma or a way of being, we can really transform the world. Only when this form of change takes place massively our university as a whole can become verifiably conscious and transformative.

Rapid social transformation requires teachers to learn about the issues, interests, needs of their students. If there is nothing else to realize the irreducible difference of students and the difficulty that is encountered, then we limit ourselves to transmit knowledge completely neglecting the operational, motivational, participatory dimension. The figure of the teacher, custodian of knowledge, who requires the student to return only what has been learned, denies learning that dimension of pleasure, creativity, partnership, favoring repetitiveness, the rigid sequentiality of the disciplinary contents that easily produce boredom, disinterest, indifference for what you want to learn. Putting the student at the center of the educational process, however, means focusing on his potential, using knowledge as a pretext to guide him to "discover himself". It means promoting the educational teaching mentioned by E. Morin. "... to transmit not pure knowledge, but a culture that allows us to understand our condition and help us live; it is at the same time a way of thinking in an open and free way."

Method of study and cognitive styles

A central space in the priority of the educational action must be occupied by the acquisition of a study method and by the mastery of personal learning strategies, forming 'strategic students', students able to master their own learning rhythms, aware of their cognitive styles and able to analyze the causes of success and failure. We are different and this diversity leads us to adopt differentiated learning strategies. If in class teaching is impossible to adapt to the cognitive profiles of each student, students need to equip themselves and learn how to use their cognitive and not just cognitive characteristics in the most appropriate way.

The task of facilitating this process lies with the university. Creating choices in the educational pathways is possible as long as you know how to translate the disciplinary contents into modulated and flexible curricula. To ensure that equality of opportunity does not remain a utopian aspiration, the university must commit itself to becoming a learning environment more responsive to the cognitive, emotional and social styles of the students, a learning environment that can foster that need for identity, belonging, personal fulfillment that is the basis on which we build confrontation, common reflection, solidarity.

Education reformers have long maintained that there is a fundamental connection between emotional imbalance and poor life prospects. As Paul Tough argued and popularized, stress early in life can prompt a cascade of negative effects, psychologically and

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neurologically—poor self-control and underdeveloped executive function, in particular. The present education system's focus on cognitive intelligence—IQ scores and academic skills like arithmetic—undermines the development of equally vital forms of non-cognitive intelligence. This type of intelligence entails dimensions of the mind that are difficult to quantify. It is the foundation of good character, resilience, and long-term life fulfillment. It is this part of the mind that mindfulness seeks to address.

The transformation begins with the individual. By regularly practicing full awareness and applying it in our lives and work, we begin to realize that we are not the victims of circumstances and that we have the power to change ourselves and our students for the better. Full attention can provide the understanding we need to develop a completely new education model that we can begin to do right now in our lives and our classrooms. As teachers, we are important models for our students. We are in the unique position of "being the change".

Full attention can be the most effective, simplest and safest way to promote the attention and goodness we want for our students. As William James pointed out, "the ability to bring your attention back willingly again and again, is the foundation of judgment, character and will" (James 424). That means mindfulness, and as James continued, "an education that would improve this ability would be education through excellence."

Instead of simply training students' minds to absorb and regurgitate facts to get good results in exams, full attention has the potential to promote valuable cognitive abilities such as creative thinking, putting things in perspective, and innovative solutions problems. These abilities are particularly important for our collective capacity to address the difficult issues we are currently facing.

Practicing full awareness also supports the social and emotional dimension of development by promoting an ethos of compassion and empathy. Moreover, it provides us with the tools to become more aware of our emotional experiences and to better understand emotions - essential skills for building successful social relationships. Full attention adds value to social and emotional learning, cultivating the capacity for self-awareness and self-regulation of the two essential dimensions of this learning. Full attention can be described as a development resource for understanding our inner life - the witness that moves spiritual development in the laic sense of the word. (Jennings). It promotes the feeling of belonging and connection. Experimenting the impartial awareness of the present moment, we can recognize the common human character and interdependence of one another and life in its entirety not as a philosophical abstraction but as a direct experience of the interconnection. Taking care of each other, of the living beings on our planet becomes an ethical mandate to recognize our unity.

Conclusions

Practicing full awareness promotes awakening. As we improve our attention skills, we develop our intuition. We begin to notice subtle details that we have never noticed, thus awakening in us a deeper understanding of situations, reciprocal relationships and systems.
Applying full attention to teaching gives us and our students a certain "space", truly accepting and recognizing the value and meaning inherent in their motives and actions instead of trying to make them fit into a pattern of institutional requirements.

Full attention has been given to promoting a beneficial lifestyle. When we become deeply aware of our usual patterns of behavior, thinking, emotion, we begin to take responsibility for these aspects of our experience and understand better how they affect others. We no longer consider ourselves victims of circumstances. We realize we have an infinite number of options to react to any given situation. Our old self-destructive patterns are fading and we begin to care better for ourselves.

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Today, the world is changing so fast that it's hard to know how it will look even over a decade. Although we cannot foresee the common features of the world that our young people will inherit, we know that the pace of change will most likely continue to accelerate. (Thomas, Brown).

Therefore, we can be assured that our students will have to be adaptable, creative, resilient, courageous, innovative, persistent, open minded and cooperative. They will have to learn how to think without preconceived ideas, so that they can find new ways of addressing seemingly insoluble problems.

In 1946, The New York Times reported that Albert Einstein had sent a telegram to several hundreds of American personalities asking them for a national campaign to promote a new way of thinking. In the telegram, he wrote, "A new type of thinking is essential if we want mankind to survive and advance to higher levels." (Atomic Education Urged). Mindfulness can hold the key to transforming our way of thinking.

Ironically, change in thinking is most likely to occur when we cease to be able to find solutions being full of anxiety. When experimenting in a conscious manner the fullness of the present moment, a multitude of possibilities occur spontaneously, effortlessly. When we expand our perspective, our mind makes connections of whose existence we were not aware.

Otto Scharmer, professor at MIT, calls this process of accessing potential *presencing*. In the context of the "U theory" he developed - a method of managing change -, Scharmer describes it as the ability to allow the future to occur spontaneously (Scharmer). According to Scharmer, we have failed collectively to solve problems by causing a blind spot that blocks our ability to recognize the inner source from which transformational change may occur. When a team connects in this interior space, it begins to operate on a higher level as "an intentional vehicle for an emerging future" (Scharmer).

Through this new understanding, we can move the focal point of education from the accumulation of knowledge to the cultivation of understanding, wisdom, meaning, and a shared sense of humanity. We can generate a deep sense of care and compassion for our fellows all over the globe. We have all the tools to make our lifestyle become sustainable and just from the moral and ethical point of view. Applying abilities of full awareness can help us cultivate collective will. Recognizing our interdependence we see that we have no choice but to broaden our narrow vision beyond our individual wishes and needs.

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