

Mindful teaching: Laying the Dharma foundations for Buddhist education in Australia

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This paper reports on research conducted in the first mainstream school in Australia being guided by Buddhist philosophy. It focuses on a group of teachers, examining the impact of Buddhism on their teaching, exploring the challenge for them of bringing together their professional knowledge with Buddhist worldview.

The major conclusion is that the school philosophy demands ‘mindful teaching’ through a confluence of elements that have direct impact on teachers: its pioneering school status and its conflict management practices that focus on self-responsibility and compassionate communication for creating a peaceful, mindful school culture of belonging; and, that these foundational elements required the teachers to be adaptive and willing to develop their understanding of Buddhism, and allow its influence into their professional practice, for example, their pedagogical approach and the development of curriculum materials.

[Keywords: Dharma; Buddhist worldview; pioneer school; conflict management; mindful teaching; teacher adaptivity]

The question of real, lasting world peace concerns human beings, so basic human feelings are also at its roots. Through inner peace, genuine world peace can be achieved. In this the importance of individual responsibility is quite clear; an atmosphere of peace must first be created within ourselves, then gradually expanded to include our families, our communities, and ultimately the whole planet (His Holiness the Dalai Lama. (cited in Kraft, 1992, p.2)

This paper examines teacher responses to the impact of Buddhism on their teaching, exploring their educational philosophy and approach, their daily practice of teaching, and the challenge of bringing together the mainstream education curriculum with a Buddhist worldview in the first Buddhist school in Australia. This paper provides insight into the development of a new form of teaching, ‘Mindful Teaching’ that is being shaped by Buddhist philosophy and Dharma practices, creating a school culture of ‘mindful belonging’.

More broadly, this research investigates the teaching occupation in a global economy where nations are experiencing rapidly changing demographics. Buddhism is often mentioned as one of the fastest growing religions in Australia, with the Australian Bureau of Statistics reporting that: “Followers of religions other than Christianity have shown the largest proportional increases since the 1996 census. The number of persons affiliated with Buddhism increased by 79%, with Hinduism by 42%, Islam by 40% and Judaism 5%” (ABS, 2012). While some of the growth in Buddhism as a religion has occurred because of the immigration of Asian Buddhists to Australia, there is a notable European population who have also had long-term involvement with various Buddhist traditions (ABS, 2012; Croucher, 1989). Both groups want schooling that reflects their Buddhist values and practices within Australian education. In parallel, the emergence of Buddhism as a world religion has caused education systems across Buddhist Asia to re-evaluate the place of religion in their national education systems (Ma Rhea, 1994). After many years following the advice of organisations such as the World Bank and UNESCO about the development of compulsory state-funded primary education based on the western model of schooling, Inthankamhaeng (2536BE) and Tapingkae (1985) have successfully argued for the reassertion, for example, of Thai Theravadan Buddhism in formal schooling. Kopong (1995) examines a similar process in Indonesian schools. Scholars such as Beare & Slaughter (1993), Bourdieu & Passeron (1997), Singh (1991), and Teasdale & Ma Rhea (2000) have all made sustained critique of school education and its impact and relevance in the world. Smyth, Dow, Hattam, Reid and Shacklock (2000) have examined teachers’ work under this new economic globalisation. Buddhist scholars such as Buddhadasa (1988), Conze, 1980), Nyanatiloka (1982), Sivaraksa (1994), and other scholars such as Smullyan (1977) and Sternberg (1990) have argued for the necessity of rethinking education by drawing on Buddhist philosophy.

This is a pivotal issue. The school teaching profession is under increasing pressure to accommodate the needs of its diversity of learners in Australia and internationally. In a ‘crowded curriculum’ there is little time to cover this diversity in a professionally focussed way in pre-service training at universities and, in countries such as Australia, most professional development in the field of specialist education topics is occurring in post-university professional development training. There is little research that has been conducted in the emerging field of Buddhist schooling in Australia. Smith (2010) has examined Buddhist education programs offered as part of religious education in schools in Victoria. This project examines mainstream Australian schooling that explicitly creates a Buddhist-inspired teaching and learning environment beyond the confines of a religious studies program.

Shaw and Swingler (2005) offer insight into how a new school established a “values-and-belief driven school culture” (p.11), pointing to the priority placed on this aspect in establishing the school in their study. There were a number of similarities and differences noted between this approach and the one adopted by the Dharma School. The main point of commonality was that each school gave careful consideration to the

values that would be the focus of the initial phase of the development of the school culture.

It is important to note that unlike Shaw & Swingler's school or other western Buddhist schools such as the Dharma School in Brighton, UK, the School in this study has not been established as a faith-based school but rather as an independent school that is inspired by Buddhist philosophy, emphasising the philosophical rather than religious elements of Buddhism. Internationally, as noted by Erricker (2009, p.83), while "there are Buddhist Schools in Buddhist countries" the emergence of interest in having Buddhist schools in the West is recent. In his work, he provides an historical overview of the development of the Dharma School in Brighton, started in 1994, as a new form of alternative schooling emerging in western countries. He notes the democratic context of these schools and develops an argument in support of the potential for Buddhist philosophy to inspire schooling that is both "radically democratic and child-centred" (Erricker, 2009, p.87). He cites Batchelor (1998, cited in Erricker, 2009, p.88) when discussing the reasoning behind using the moniker 'Dharma School' rather than 'Buddhist School' saying that it was considered important by the founders of the Brighton school that Buddhism be understood as a way of thinking and being, rather than as a set of habitual religious practices, in order to establish a 'culture of awakening', the primary goal of the Buddhist approach to life.

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The study, of which this paper reports part, investigates schooling in Australia that is incorporating Buddhist philosophy into its educational approach, specifically its pedagogy, curriculum development and the broader enculturation practices of the school. The Daylesford Dharma School was established in 2009 and is the first primary school in Australia that is explicitly shaping itself according to Buddhism. It is a not for profit, independent school. It has a social inclusiveness policy and is committed to a low fee-base in order to sustain accessibility by the local community regardless of their ability to pay. Founded on the philosophical principles of Buddhism, the school teaches children compassion, wisdom, interdependence, and respect for all life, with a focus on community connectivity and sustainability. Various teaching methods are being trialled including, "...emotional learning, reflective practices, an awareness programme, cross discipline learning, integrated curriculum, the spirit of inquiry and debate, conflict resolution training, interconnectedness with community and environment" (Daylesford Dharma School Website, 2011).

A note on terms

In this paper, there are a number of ways that terms are used to describe the ways that the school and its teachers are bringing Buddhist ideas into mainstream. For example, Dharma School, rather than Buddhist School, was the descriptor chosen by the school. The word 'Dharma', literally 'the bearer' in Pali, (Nyanatiloka, 1988, pp.55-56) means many things in the various Buddhist traditions but all agree that it is a term that has

the meanings phenomenon, doctrine, and object of the mind. In its educational sense, it means teaching based on truth of the way things are and suggests that any child can attain the greatest peace and happiness through the practice of Dharma. The Dharma School, therefore, considers that it is the responsibility of the school and its teachers to provide each child with the necessary tools to be fully responsible, and to engage in their own practice and commitment.

The founders of the school were clear in their vision of the school as an independent school, inspired by Buddhist philosophy. It does not identify itself as a religious school and, thus, [repetition of connective too close] does not explicitly teach the rituals and practices associated with the religious elements of Buddhism. However, there are elements of Tibetan Buddhist ritual in parts of the school program taught from the perspective of mindfulness.

Expressions such as ‘Buddhist-inspired’, ‘Buddhist-influenced’, and ‘teaching Buddhistically’ are all used in this paper to describe emerging understandings and practices. In this sense, there is not yet a ‘settled’ language being used to describe and explain the work of the teachers¹.

The word ‘mindfulness’ has a specific meaning within Buddhist literature. Mindfulness² is a practice of cultivating awareness in each moment both in daily activity and in the body and mental activities. To be mindful allows one to become aware of one’s thoughts, words, and behaviours. This sort of mindfulness is a key element of the school’s approach, supporting the teachers and students to create a peaceful school culture of belonging and one that finds teachers developing a new pedagogical approach that I have termed ‘Mindful Teaching’.

APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

This research is a descriptive, interpretative study of the narratives of the Director and the teachers about their views and understandings of Buddhism in schooling, the impact of Buddhism on the culture of the school, on teaching, and their developing professional knowledge about teaching in a Buddhist-inspired school. This research draws on both educational (Cohen & Manion, 1994; Merriam, 1998) and sociological (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Silvermann, 2000; Strauss & Corbin, 1990) research traditions, in using a case-study as a methodological approach and as a research strategy (Stake, 1994, 1995; Tellis, 1997; Yin, 2009) drawing on the principles of participatory action research (PAR, Wadsworth, 1998).

The key informants for this research have been the Director³, a long-time Buddhist

1 For more information on the various Buddhist terms used in the paper, please refer to Buddhadatta Mahathera (1979) and Nyanatiloka Mahathera (1988) and website resources such as the Glossary of Buddhist Terms.

2 Pali-sati. The Satipaṭṭhāna Sutta, the Foundations of Mindfulness, is a core Buddhist text.

3 In this paper the Director of the school is identified as the Director with her permission but

practitioner and four staff, Heruka, also a long-time Buddhist practitioner, Thelma, Eva, and Harvey, who are not Buddhist. Heruka, Eva, and Harvey are relatively new teachers. Thelma has substantial mainstream teaching experience. A casual relief teacher who is also a prospective parent, one of the school administrative staff, and a Board member have also contributed to focus group discussions and provided personal comment on various aspects of the school and its development.

The key research question for this aspect of the study is:

What are the professional challenges facing mainstream teachers working at a Buddhist school?

The two sub-questions are:

- *What does it mean to be a 'Buddhist school' in Australia?*

- *How are mainstream teachers negotiating their educational approach, teaching methods, and the development of curriculum materials to respond to the need to be a Buddhist school?*

The researcher conducted focus group interviews and individual interviews with the teaching staff. She also did classroom observations and participated in talks⁴ and workshops⁵ as a participant observer (see Appendix One for the Interview Questions).

The data analysis has been undertaken progressively using the techniques developed by Strauss and Corbin (1990). The researcher undertook preliminary analysis of the interview data and classroom observation notes, guided by Saldaña (2009) and Richards (2009), using three levels of analysis: first, using techniques of open and axial coding, drawing out the main themes; second, undertaking a cluster analysis of key themes; and third, bringing the second level analysis to the research question as the capstone analysis. This three level analysis was then taken back to the group and, ensuring that privacy and anonymity of interviewees was protected, the researcher developed a coherent empirical response to the research question and its sub-questions. A part of the wider study forms the basis for this paper.

ANALYSIS OF FINDINGS

This paper focuses on two themes that emerged from analysis that speak to the impact of this school on teacher professional practice: Foundational Elements and Teacher Adaptivity. Teachers spoke of Foundational Elements, regarding them as formative of their mainstream teaching practice in the development of the school as a distinctive,

all other informants have taken a pseudonym.

4 The research team and staff attended the series of lectures given by His Holiness the Dalia Lama in Melbourne, 2011 (HHDL, 2011).

5 The research team and staff attended a workshop 'Creating Compassionate Cultures' conducted by Pam Cayton (Bendigo, 2011) (Cayton, 2011).

Buddhist-inspired, Dharma school. There is notable impact on the developing teaching culture by nature of being a pioneer school. The other important aspect of developing the teaching culture has been on establishing the school as a peaceful, inclusive learning environment using Buddhist adaptation of the non-violent communication approach and through the development of the Awareness Program in order to support mindfulness and a sense of belonging in the school.

Analysis of the data highlights Teacher Adaptivity in both their pedagogical approach and their engagement with the curriculum as they develop their professional knowledge about how to teach in an effective, child-centred, Buddhist-inspired way in a mainstream Australian school.

Foundational elements impacting on the teachers

A pioneer school. Daylesford Dharma School began in 2009, arising out of many discussions between a Tibetan monk, Geshe Konchok Tsering, the Dharma School's founder, and the Director of the school. He wanted to provide an opportunity for Australians in his newly adopted home to have an education inspired by Buddhist principles and ideas. He saw, in Australia, a society and a schooling system that did not provide philosophical training for young minds. He says:

If in the formative years of a child's education, the focus is strongly on how to get ahead in this life and achieve, without a balance of focus on inner development, then there is not much chance of the inner qualities of compassion and kindness coming to the fore. Take for example politicians - they are considered to be at the peak of personal success. Yet what policies do they have for improving compassion and kindness?

Prior to 2009, the foundations of the idea of a school developed and parents in the local community showed interest in this idea. As will be discussed below further, Daylesford has a relatively long settlement history and has, more recently, attracted families looking for an alternative rural life. Many of these families are supportive of alternative education and are sympathetic to Buddhist philosophy. Anecdotally, it appears that many families would not describe themselves as Buddhist per se but they liked the idea of a school that was to be shaped in some way by Buddhist philosophy. The Director explains:

Any pioneering school needs enormous support from its parents and, in a sense, it needs a willingness from its students as well and yet you are bringing students into a school that has no school culture yet and no cultural understanding of what it means to be a Buddhist. And we need to acknowledge that 98 per cent of our families are not Buddhist.

The school community sees itself as being 'pioneer' by the fact of being the first Buddhist-inspired government school to be established in Australia. It is a fact that sits well with this school and, arguably, provided it with important cohesion, sense of belonging, and impetus in the foundational early years. Being a Buddhist-inspired school, every aspect of the development of the school needed to be examined through

this lens. The school founders searched internationally for advice, borrowing, and adapting as needed. As described by the informants, everything developed iteratively. There were government requirements to be fulfilled in registering the school and these processes required the school to have a governance structure, a clearly articulated vision and mission statement, and a raft of policies that would guide the development of the school. As the structural shape of the school developed and the premises were found, the founders, the parents, and the new governing board worked together to give shape to this pioneering experiment, employed staff and opened the school in Term 1, 2009.

Conflict resolution through self-awareness and compassionate communication.

Of foundational importance to this work was the development of an agreed approach to the resolution of conflict. Over the first two years, there was an evolving understanding that developed within the school, for teaching and administrative staff, students and also within the wider parent group about how a Buddhist-inspired school might mobilise the concept of Dharma to lay the foundations for the day-to-day supports for the creation of a peaceful, successful, and inclusive school culture and at the same time develop some clear policies and guidelines about how to manage conflict. The Buddhist notion of conflict resolution seeks to give each being the tools to become mindfully aware of their thoughts and behaviours and to understand how unskillfulness in either will create suffering for themselves and those around them. Arguably, this is one of the defining features of a school that is inspired by Buddhist philosophy – creating a culture of mindful belonging. As the Director explains:

It is at a point of non-cooperation and conflict that we would most be looking at defining what a Buddhist school is, how we resolve that conflict, what arises for us as a teacher or a staff member when we are having extreme resistance, belligerence or violent behaviour. Children developmentally move through so much throughout their cycles and it really is the test of a teacher whether we resort to punitive measures, whether we resort to all the default modes that can come up in dealing with conflict.

One of the foundation teachers, Heruka, saw the opportunity to develop an Awareness Program that would be suited to young children. She gives the following example of the program:

We do a lot of practice of bringing awareness to the body - what colour is it? where is it? Particularly with children whose awareness is through their bodies, we do a lot of practice of sharing that and they have a lot of confidence and willingness and they want to. This morning we were talking about exploring deep listening to ourselves and to each other. We each came in with different experiences and then we tracked them in our body – can you find that? They have got to know what they are. And the kids were great ... “I have a red bit here” and “I have a green arm because...” Then we did another meditation on the same colours and experience and looked at it in a new light and saw that it could be OK and didn’t have to affect the whole day or affect everyone in the classroom. You don’t have to be grumpy all day because of a brief experience in the morning. It is very important that they get the opportunity to investigate these experiences for themselves and to express themselves and to understand how these experiences

can make their day a bad one or a good one and do we want a bad day or do we want a good one?

We are getting a culture going.

The beginning of each school day begins with the Awareness Program and children arriving early to school are invited to sit quietly and meditate with the on-duty teacher. In the early days, this was not possible, as was explained above, because there was not yet a cohesive school culture. Now that the children are more familiar with the tempo of the school and its ways of doing schooling, they will sometimes join the teacher. At the start of each day, everyone meditates together before returning to their class groups with their teachers. There might be a reading, a story, a discussion about a particular issue that has arisen, and the children are encouraged to raise and contribute to issues. The daily Awareness Program gives the teacher an anchor for reminding the children of the key Buddhist idea for the day and provides a point of critical reflection for strengthening the self-awareness of the children and the staff and creating learning spaces of self-responsible peace.

As the Director explained above, the human condition is that there is always conflict arising and the school needed a way of approaching the management of conflict that was appropriate to the school's emerging understanding of itself as a Dharma school. The school adopted the Non-Violent Communication method (see, for example, web resources available at NVCA, 2012) also called Compassionate Communication. They also developed two distinctive policies, a Bullying & Harassment Policy and a Conflict Resolution Policy, that reflect the influence of a Buddhist thinking about conflict. The preamble of the Bullying and Harassment policy provides an example of this:

Our school community values and promotes inner development, reflective awareness, empathy, compassion, and positive self-esteem.

We believe that all students, staff, parents, and volunteers are entitled to a secure, safe, and friendly environment where both physical and emotional well-being is mutually supported.

Our school community commits to the Buddhist precept of non-harm and the process of learning to treat all beings with dignity, respect, and tolerance.

We commit to the principle that when mistakes are made and difficulties arise, an opportunity for reflective learning is inherent within the situation. Out of challenging conflict situations, real change is possible and expected (DDS Website, 2012).

In one of the focus group meetings, the Director and the teachers agreed that they regard their adoption of NVC and its adaptation as the Compassionate Communication method as being “really useful in our experience in our school because teachers get it very easily and it has a strong alignment with our principles” (The Director, May 2011). The teachers, in particular, were pivotal in laying the foundations for this approach to ensure that it was consistently applied across all aspects of the school's engagement with children and their parents. The choice made by the staff to employ this method required teachers to examine their previous approaches to behaviour management,

and in particular, to conflict management. All school policies and the choice of the Compassionate Communication method for resolving conflict are all held together by the Five Precepts, the Buddhist guiding principles for living⁶. These are, as worded by the school:

Deep Listening and Loving Speech;
 Generosity;
 Bodily Responsibility;
 Mindful Consumption; and,
 Reverence for All Life.

Harvey also gives the following example of how he links the Five Precepts to his teaching practice:

When the students do their voting at the end of the day for who to give a star to their voting is based on the five precepts: generosity, reverence for life, loving speech, body responsibility, deep listening. They get the content and how it relates to that act.

Similar to Shaw and Swingler (2005) who report that ‘We aimed to choose a number of values that could be kept at the conscious level of operation and could become the major influences within the “hidden curriculum” or school culture over time’ (p.11), the Dharma School foundational staff chose to focus on operationalising the Five Precepts into the daily functioning of the school, in order to lay the foundations of the school culture. The articulated values of the Dharma School (2011) are:

The practice of non-harm, the path of wisdom and compassion, community in sustainable co-existence, the view of interdependence, and the development of intelligence informed by universal responsibility.

Erricker’s (2009) insights are relevant to Daylesford Dharma School. Analysis of the discussions with the Director and the teaching staff provided evidence that there has been clear intention to found this school as a place where children are encouraged to learn how to think rather than telling them what to think, inspired by a Buddhist worldview. Like the Brighton Dharma School, preliminary analysis of the research data arising from this study demonstrates that creating a school environment and culture that reflects Buddhist philosophy and Dharma practices has been the foundational work of the early years, has been dependent on the charismatic leadership of a committed group of people, and is influenced by the demands and expectations of the parent group.

Teacher adaptivity

Teacher Adaptivity has been the second theme arising from the analysis of the data. The teacher group in this study, Heruka, Thelma, Eva, and Harvey, all spoke often about the challenges they have faced, both individually and collegially, in trying to

⁶ Pali: *pañca-sīlāni*; Sanskrit: *pañca-śīlāni*

bring their professional teacher knowledge to their work of laying the foundations for Buddhist-influenced education in Australia.

Personal engagement with Buddhism. The Director of the school has had the responsibility of staffing the school since it began. There have been changes in the teaching staff as the shape of the school has changed and developed. The current staff group has been together for two years now and there is an emerging sense of stability after the initial, more turbulent, foundation period. The basis for staff selection is on merit, rather than whether they are Buddhist or not. Even so, the teachers are expected to reflect the vision and mission of the school and be supportive of its intentions to be a school that is inspired by Buddhist philosophy. This demands a substantial commitment by the teachers personally as well as professionally. For example, the teachers are expected to abide by, and model, the Five Precepts of the school. As the Director said, “I am gob smacked by how persevering our teachers are. Generosity seems to be the fundamental quality that is there. There is a lot of patience there.”

After the early period, the Director realised that the teachers needed personal and professional development about the basic tenets of Buddhism but within the school context rather than in a religious context. In addition to having opportunity to speak with the founding monk, the teachers have undertaken a regular program with external consultants, one of whom offers personal development support while the other focuses on professional development. The personal support has provided an important opportunity for the teachers to explore the impact of their understandings of Buddhism, of religion more generally, of Buddhist practices, such as meditation and the Five Precepts in a context where they may be supporting their students on the same journey in the classroom setting. In parallel, the teachers have been undertaking a professional development program that has introduced the group to the basic tenets of Buddhism⁷ within the context of both their pedagogical approach to their teaching and to the impact of this on the ways that they are approaching the development of curriculum materials and their Awareness Program.

Mindful teaching: an emerging pedagogical approach. The teachers are involved on a daily basis with teaching their students the mainstream Australian curriculum and in guiding them in their developing understanding of core values, attitudes, and behaviours. The teachers’ understandings of Buddhism influence the way that they explain things to the students in their classes. Heruka explains the importance of teachers constantly needing to revisit their approach to teaching in this school, saying:

...and what I’ve noticed is that whenever we have a new intake of staff or set up for a new term we need to keep revisiting what we are doing because it’s something that we need to be continually reminded of: what is the view here? ‘cause its radically different to any other view [I have ever experienced] of why we are being educated ... here we are actually educating ourselves out of ignorance into enlightenment as well as having highly functional people who can take part in this society...

7 Broadly, these are: the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, and Dependent Origination.

Thelma says, “One of the inspiring things for me is the amount of pedagogical discussion that goes on – not just Monday at staff meetings but whenever we have five minutes.”

In discussions with the teachers, and through the classroom observations undertaken in this study, they report how demanding the children can be in trying to make sense of the Buddhist ideas to which they are being introduced and are experiencing through the Awareness Program, the meditations, the whole school discussions about Compassionate Communication, and through the daily reminders about self-responsibility, mindfulness, and in the practice of the five precepts. Every teacher action is subject to question by the children as they seek answers to their questions, or in a class of older children, try to catch the teacher out doing the ‘wrong’ thing.

Harvey explains:

...What really attracts me to this school is the notion of the inner Buddha, the inner wisdom. ...The kids have an unsullied view...without caveats. Innate sense of fairness and equality and then we learn: he is more deserving, he is less deserving, he is a boy so he needs to eat more, you are a girl you deserve less, etc. That doesn't have to happen here...it can be different...

Heruka provides the following example:

...I have been doing an experiment with the students on positive speech and negative speech. We settle the students and one of the teachers makes different statements. We ask the students to check where they feel these in their bodies and when they hear the positive speech, they feel really uncomfortable in their bodies. Some of our students are rejects from other schools, these are the kinds of students you are going to get in the first couple of years, and they are really hard-core. We have some relief teachers who will not be in the same room with two of the boys.

All their way of speaking with each other is putting each other down and what is underneath all that is a lack of self-confidence.... If they get an opportunity to do a drawing, it is so much more exciting to draw a mean creature than a kind creature and that is what is going on for them. And at the slightest opportunity, they will give up. Somehow, that has to be addressed using the Buddhist framework.

How do you create an intrinsically motivated path in an extrinsically motivated time, you know ... the “yuck-wow” culture we are in?

Thelma speaks about how much she enjoys teaching at the school, as someone with substantial teaching experience in mainstream schools and she highlights the child-centred nature approach of the school saying,

Here we are looking a lot more at the child rather than looking at a cohort that is my experience within the mainstream education.... I think it's about developing something that explores what is the noble path within the child rather than focusing on what a child knows extrinsically...

Harvey also acknowledges the potential for him to develop a differentiated pedagogical approach that is supported by the school ethos and how positive he, as new teacher, finds this to be for his students, and for himself as a teacher. He explains:

I think the difference between the Dharma school and any other school is this honouring of innate wisdom, working with what is already there, drawing that out, rather than – they love to use gardening analogies in the Buddhist texts that I've read – it's not this weedy field of ignorance and stupidity that we as a teacher are plucking out...its actually watering and cultivating what is already there whether they be an oak tree a tomato ... the education system seems always to only want to harvest the same crop – this monocultural notion that we are all just machines, we are all just bricks in the wall. I think it is an awakening in our society that is starting to wake up because it hasn't worked. It's made good little cannon fodder for industry but it hasn't made good people.

The teacher group spend considerable amounts of time together outside school hours developing their professional understanding of their work context. As Thelma says, "It has been like working two jobs but it has been fantastic." The group demonstrates energy and commitment to their work and they are constantly challenged professionally about their teaching approach. They are beginning to document some of their work in the development of pedagogy in this Buddhist space because of the need to induct and orient new teaching staff. They reported that the process of documentation is driving them to articulate their approach to teaching and that it also provides them with opportunity for reflective practice.

Engagement with the curriculum. Equally, they are becoming concerned with documenting what they have already learned about curriculum development and the content of the Awareness Program. Initially, the teachers who had no experience of Buddhism spoke of their lack of confidence in adapting the curriculum. Towards the end of the data gathering year, as a participant observer in their planning day, I saw clear evidence of their confidence in their approach growing as they together were developing new curriculum materials.

Heruka was given the responsibility to develop the Awareness Program with the other teachers learning from her how to teach the children these materials. In the early stages of the program development, most teachers would read a Buddhist story, for example, one of the Jataka Tales, and discuss the key ideas with the children. It was common at this time to observe a slippage between a Buddhist understanding of the story and the Christianised or humanistic interpretations made by the teachers. This is less the case now as the teachers have grown in their understanding. They have become more mindful that their interpretation might not be Buddhist and are now more likely to understand the difference between the way that they were brought up to understand a concept and the new way of thinking about it that is more grounded in a Buddhist philosophical worldview.

Thelma explains:

...One of the professional challenges facing us as mainstream teachers is really the re-evaluation of the curriculum that you are presenting because you don't think about curriculum in the same way in a Buddhist perspective as you do in a mainstream perspective.... It's actually really deeply thinking about what is our vision, what is it that we value within a child's education - their whole education

right through from prep when we first see them to grade six or grade five at the moment.

Recently, there has been a growing confidence exhibited by the teachers in their engagement with developing and choosing appropriate curriculum materials for their teaching. There is a sense of satisfaction in their successes to date as the children are performing well in NAPLAN tests and this has given them added confidence to undertake the next phase of work which is to gather, review, and formalise what materials have worked and what have not over the past few years. Given the inevitable changes in staff that occur in any school, the teachers are keen to do this work so that newly arriving teachers do not face the pressures that they experienced and, as Eva said, “So they don’t have to reinvent the wheel...or muck up all the good work we have done.”

CONCLUSION

The focus of this paper has been on how ‘Mindful Teaching’ is being developed by a group of mainstream Australian teachers. This study finds that the impact of Buddhism on teaching has been considerable through the development of a Buddhist-inclined school culture and in both pedagogical approach and in the development of curriculum materials. At an epistemological level, the teachers engage daily with mindfulness about the similarities and differences in Buddhist and non-Buddhist understandings of human behaviour. The daily Awareness Program provides an anchor for classroom teaching, held by the wider school policies and guiding principles for behaviour that have developed from the five Buddhist precepts and the Compassionate Communication method for dealing with conflict.

This study is limited by being a single study and arguably there are a number of unique attributes of the school that influence its work of bringing Buddhist understanding to the practice of mainstream education in Australia. There are only a small number of comparable schools internationally that are adopting various Buddhist approaches to education and this foundational research hopes to contribute to a growing understanding of this new form of schooling in Western, democratic countries.

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Web resources

- Atisha Buddhist Centre at www.atishacentre.org.au
- Buddhamind at www.buddhamind.info/leftside/activities/craft.htm
- Foundation for the Preservation of the Mahayana Tradition at www.fpmt.org
- Daylesford Dharma School (DDS) website at www.dharmaschool.com.au
- Dewey, J. 2002. John Dewey Project on Progressive Education. At <http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/>
- Dharma School, UK at <http://www.dharmaschool.co.uk>
- Family Buddhism at www.familybuddhism.com
- Family Dharma Connections at familydharma.pulelehuadesign.com
- Foundation for Developing Compassion and Wisdom at www.essential-education.org
- Glossary of Buddhist Terms at <http://www.buddhist-tourism.com/buddhism/glossary-of-buddhist-terms.html>
- Maitreya School at www.fpmt.dk/text/Maitreya%20School%20Curriculum.pdf
- Non-Violent Communication in Australia (NVCA) at <http://www.nvcaustralia.com/>
- Tara Redwood School at www.tararedwoodschool.org
- Venerable Thubten Chodron at www.thubtenchodren.org/youthanddharma

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Ethics approval

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APPENDIX A: THEMATIC QUESTIONS FOR TEACHERS

The interviews aim to collect your views on the impact of Buddhism on teaching, exploring the educational philosophy and approach, the daily practice of teaching, and the challenge of bringing together the mainstream Victorian education curriculum with a Buddhist worldview in the first Buddhist school in Australia. More broadly, we will discuss the teaching occupation in a global economy where nations are experiencing rapidly changing demographics. In many western countries, Buddhism is one of the fastest growing religions (DFAT, 2008). In parallel, the emergence of Buddhism as a world religion has caused education systems across Buddhist Asia to re-evaluate the place of religion in their national education systems.

The main question we will be exploring together is:

- In what ways does Buddhist worldview change mainstream teaching practice in Australia?

The three sub-questions we will discuss are:

- What does it mean to be a ‘Buddhist school’ in Australia?

- How are mainstream teachers negotiating their educational approach, teaching methods, and the development of curriculum materials to respond to the need to be a Buddhist school?

- What are the professional challenges facing mainstream teachers working at a Buddhist school?

What is your general experience of Buddhism in Australia? Outside of Australia?

How would you define a successful Buddhist mainstream school?

What conditions need to exist, according to Buddhist worldview, to facilitate a successful school?

From your role, describe the contribution of each enabling aspect that would influence this success.

Which of these enabling aspects is the most important?

What were your experiences in working with other schools?

What was your role?

What were some of the best parts of this experience, the most challenging parts, the interesting parts?

What are the best parts about working here at a Buddhist school?

What particular challenges face you here?

What are the most interesting parts?

What are your professional development needs?

Any other comments?