

## **Mindfulness and Forest School – Jon Cree 28.6.15.**

It's funny how something so old in practice throughout many of the planet's cultures has suddenly come to the fore in 'trendiness' in education and yet has been, for me, actually something good educators have often incorporated into their practice – the practice of 'mindfulness'. So let's just start by explaining what I see as mindfulness before looking at how synergistic it is with FS practice.

On the Mindfulness in Schools website the definition given is;

“Mindfulness involves learning to direct our attention to our experience as it unfolds, moment by moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance. Rather than worrying about what has happened or might happen, it trains us to respond skillfully to whatever is happening right now, be that good or bad” 1.

One might say I am aware, present and accepting. However, how often are we really aware of the moment and accepting of it – that little voice in our heads often worries about the past and future, shaking our fists at the state of the world and how it's ruled by vested interests. My mind does wander off, like at this point in time I am thinking about the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between North America and the EU. This potentially puts even more power into multinationals taking away employee rights and consumer standards set by our democratically elected governments and could well see the end of much environmental legislation if it discriminates against the interests of trade and international business. Or it may be wrestling with the break up of our education system and the loss of unity, coherence, consistency and equity in favour of ministerial interference. Or, in my world, how do we support quality Forest School when resources are limited and the FSA tries to wrestle with all the demands it has, as well as trying to survive. While doing this I am shaking my fist or worrying unhelpfully because the world does not match the vision in my brain of how it “should be”. I get stuck in my head and succumb to the Cartesian way of ‘I think therefore I am’ without really actually paying attention to life around me. That voice is often there as soon as we wake, taking us on this dance of miserable judgmental journeys and taking away from the actual experiences we are participating in. Ronald Siegel, clinical professor of psychology at Harvard Medical School, states “we all take our

thoughts too seriously and think they always mean something – we are our thoughts and our thoughts are us” 2. That is, we take our thoughts about the world more seriously than the world itself. I take from this, that we are so used to our own story and mindset that to see things otherwise and to really see them for what they may be, is a real challenge. Someone once said that perception is the difference between how we see things and what they really are – so true! In addition, this can be unhealthy emotionally. Indeed all the recent neurological studies have borne this out. A 2012 Harvard study showed “In the mindful attention group, the after-training brain scans showed a decrease in activation in the right amygdala in response to all images, supporting the hypothesis that meditation can improve emotional stability and response to stress” 3. So if mindfulness is about awareness of present experience and acceptance of it, how does this manifest itself at Forest School and what does it mean for FS practitioners.

My first and probably most important thought on how this applies to FS relates Mary Drummond’s claim that one of the most important responsibilities of any educator is ‘that of OBSERVATION’ 4.

By this she means Observe – don’t judge. Education is so laden with judgment and it has gotten worse with league tables and tests, tests, tests. However if we are to be responsible educators we need to be able to observe what is



happening in a learning situation and do this without any of the baggage we carry about individuals and ourselves – to try and see what a learner is doing in that moment for what it is, not what we think it is. So as practitioners we have to let go judgmental thoughts before trying to figure out what is actually happening. Now this is difficult as you cannot turn off your brain just like that – even if you have engaged in the practice of mindfulness for many years. What a practitioner can do is recognize those judgmental and troublesome thoughts (“oh he always does that, he is doing this to get attention, he

has low self confidence, I don't know how to engage this learner – I have tried all avenues from whittling through to sketching! etc etc"). The next key thing is to not get tangled up in believing the thoughts. This is not to say empty the mind but to embrace the thoughts and accept them and then to question them and really try to see an experience for what it is. The key to this is to pay 'attention' in our FS practice. Many people would refer to this 'attention to the moment' as meditation. Indeed Mark Bertolini, an unconventional chief executive of a large health care corporation, states quite clearly; "Meditation is not about thinking about nothing.....it's about accepting what you think, giving reverence to it and letting it go. It's losing the attachment to it. Same thing with pain." 5 So how do we do this? – it is easier said than done!

Turning our attention to our **senses** is key for me in avoiding the distractions of our thought voice. Having worked in the world of ee



and oe for over 30 years , the sensory stimulation of the natural world is one of the privileges I have had in my life. The more I pay attention to the senses the more attuned and 'alive' to the moment I feel and this does feed a sense of calm and contentment.

Immersing ourselves in the Forest School world and the learning community we are part of really helps. Turning attention to the sights and sounds of the woodland (children speaking and chattering, birds calling, bees buzzing, wind

rushing, trees moving, humans climbing) the smells and textures (spring flowers, sausages cooking, the feel of willow bark when weaving) ...all of these put us in touch with 'real life experience' and can stop those previous frustrating and judging thoughts we put on ourselves – ("we've only got 5 minutes to finish and I haven't done

the review of my session, not sure what learning Tom has gained today he hasn't engaged with anything etc etc").

Trying not to ignore or steer clear of the thoughts that overlay on an experience is key - '**note them**'. Quite often thoughts keep coming up like a broken record - "oh Tom is always on a downer and he always wants undue attention when we are sitting round the fire saying he can't do it - it is going to be hard again to get him going" . So **name the thought** - in this case I had to label this thought as 'judging and doubt'. Now the label isn't crucial here what is important is it brings my attention back to the moment - the senses and the breath, and takes me out of being captured by the broken record. If this persists bring in a humorous label.

And then **turn attention back to the senses** and even to your breath - feel the moment and work with the moment and what is happening with that individual, the experience and the environment of the moment.

In the end this is about paying attention to the immediate FS world we are in, that doesn't just mean the elements of the FS world - the learners, other adults, the trees, the soil, the birds etc etc. The key is relationship - and what breaks down relationship is 'not paying attention to them' both the relationship to the woodland and the other humans we share this with, and what can distract is the voice taking us to other places and times without acknowledging that voice. Caroline Watts, who runs the Forest Kindergarten at Sevenoaks in Kent poetically and eloquently expressed this mindfulness of the moment and relational capacity experienced at Forest School. She brings to the fore the importance of natural world contact in keeping the mind fresh and the spirit alive..

".....So I've been wondering, if we couldn't all take a leaf from this tree of wisdom, let's whisper the word, around all the kingdom, of sunshine and light, darkness, rain and snow, fresh moss, grass and buttercups; wood, mud and flow. Friendliness, time, presence and freedom - never let go of the spirit inside.

Emails, money, appointments, rush-rush - wouldn't the world be a better place, if we all found our inner hush-hush; through trees, grass and laughter, woodsmoke and being; the world begins all of a sudden, to take on more meaning."

Going back to my opening statement, this is a practice that is many thousands of years old. In a number of Asian languages 'mind' and 'heart' are the same symbol or word. The reason I got involved with FS in a big way is to build a relationship between the natural and human communities and it is this attention to 'experience' and acceptance of it – mindfulness and heartfulness, that is fundamental if we are to build that relationship.

Footnote. If you want to know more about mindfulness practice do contact the mindfulness in schools organization at

[www.mindfulnessinschools.org](http://www.mindfulnessinschools.org)

### Bibliography

1. See <http://mindfulnessinschools.org/mindfulness> accessed 31.5.15
2. Siegel R (2010) The Mindfulness Solution – everyday practices for everyday problems. Guildford Press, London, New York
3. McGeevey S (2012) Mediatation's positive residual effects. <http://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2012/11/meditations-positive-residual-effects/> accessed 31.5.15
4. Drummond M (2009) Assessing Children's Learning (2<sup>nd</sup> edition). Fulton Publishers
5. See [http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/at-aetna-a-ceos-management-by-mantra.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/01/business/at-aetna-a-ceos-management-by-mantra.html?_r=0) accessed 4.3.15

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