

2017 Premier’s Anika Foundation Youth Depression Awareness Scholarship

Mindfulness as a tool in schools to help with the prevention and reduction of depression in young people

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# Introduction

The Mission Australia Youth Survey (2015) found that coping with stress, school or study problems and body image were the top concerns for young people. The teaching of mindfulness skills is one tool that can help young people manage the multiple stressors they face in both their school and personal lives. There is a growing body of evidence for the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions in schools to help reduce and prevent depression in adolescents (Griffith, Van der Gucht & Williams, 2014) and to enhance adolescents’ emotional regulation and wellbeing (Broderick & Metz, 2009).

# Focus of Study

The purpose of this study tour was to expand my knowledge and experience of mindfulness in schools through attendance at a conference (Bridging the Hearts and Minds of Youth Conference), school visits and observations, meetings with program coordinators, and attendance at two mini-retreats. With this knowledge, I feel more equipped to advise schools and staff on the use of mindfulness in the classroom and to provide ongoing professional development to teaching staff who are interested in practising and using, mindfulness skills.

This report outlines the study tour activities and brief information about the key learning. It is very difficult to summarise the breadth of activities and extensive learning in this short report, but here goes.

# Significant Learning

## Friday 10th to Sunday 12th February 2017 – Bridging the Hearts and Minds of Youth Conference, San Diego, USA

This conference brought together many well-known advocates for mindfulness in education. The conference spanned three days with a variety of workshops, beginning on the Friday with an optional pre-conference workshop. Susan Kaiser-Greenland (author of The Mindful and Mindful Games), presented two workshops and advocates for teaching mindfulness in schools in a playful and fun way. Much of the second session was experiential with Susan guiding the group through activities from her book and website.

Session One on Saturday (Mindfulness and Hip Hop as Social Justice) was presented by JG Larochette (Mindful Life Project). Their mindfulness programs teach self awareness, self regulation, impulse control, confidence and resiliency through mindfulness, yoga, expressive arts, and hip-hop/performing arts. These programs support elementary and middle school students in underserved schools and communities. The presentation included three student hip-hop performances, which was a highlight of the day. A whole-school approach is encouraged, as is the involvement of the school community to make it relevant and ensure the program’s success.

Session two on Saturday (State of the Research on Mindfulness in Education) was chaired by Randye Sample. Current research findings were presented by Matthew Goodman and Laila Madni whilst Camille Whitney directed conference candidates to the Mindful Schools website for further reading. These presenters outlined that limitations to the current research include the range of definitions of mindfulness, publication bias and self-reporting measurement tools. Despite the limitations, the speakers felt that anecdotal evidence is also very important and pointed out that “everything that counts might not be able to be counted”.

Session three on Saturday (What Really Matters in Delivering Professional Development) was presented by Heidi Bornstein and Steve Chadwick (Mindfulness Everyday). They provide training and life skills for young people, educators, and members of the community. This session focused on training educators to deliver mindfulness into schools. The presenters said that there will only be success if teachers buy into mindfulness themselves. Best practice would see teachers of mindfulness having their own regular mindfulness practice (formal and/or informal) to understand and model mindfulness strategies.

The final session on Saturday afternoon (Self-compassion for Teens) was presented by Lee-Anne Gray, a clinical and forensic psychologist. Gray believes that teaching self compassion to teens is a key skill for them to develop empathy and increase resilience and wellbeing . Neurologically, self compassion is associated with reduced negative thinking, less fear and isolation and less negative self judgement.

Session one on Sunday (Secular Mindfulness in Public Schools) was an engaging session provided by Fiona Jensen and Adria Kennedy from Calmer Choice, a non-profit organization that provides mindful awareness and social and emotional learning programs to students in Massachusetts. The presentation focused on the potential conflict around the secular nature of mindfulness versus what parents and school communities think mindfulness is. It highlighted that schools implementing mindfulness should ensure that any mindfulness or compassion program demonstrates a legitimate focus on something other than teaching or supporting religious perspectives.

Session two on Sunday, (Mindfulness as an Intervention for Youth with Trauma), was presented by Sam Himelstein, psychologist, and founder of the Center for Adolescent Studies. He researches the efficacy of mindfulness-based interventions with incarcerated and underserved adolescent populations. The session outlined the effects that trauma has on an individual’s sense of emotional safety and how mindfulness provides the opportunity to pause before responding to a trigger. Himelstein outlined strategies for working with young people from a trauma background.

The final session of the conference on Sunday afternoon, (How Teacher Wellness Creates Thriving in Schools) was presented by Kelly Knoche and Jane Mayer. The session focused on balancing personal wellness within the busyness and stress of life as an educator. Using mindfulness and self-awareness strategies, teachers can learn how to identify when they are at the level of exhaustion. Thriving teachers are very important to the learning and wellbeing of students as research has shown that this influences student engagement.

## 14th – 16th February 2017 – Calgary, Canada

Planned visits fell through, however, I was able to visit Jennie Elliott Elementary School where the school is in the beginning stages of introducing mindfulness. At the time of the visit, the school had had two staff meetings and staff were encouraged to read *Mindfulness – An Eight Week Plan for Finding Peace in a Frantic World (Mark Williams and Danny Penman)* and follow the mindfulness program for themselves. The relieving Principal said the school is keen to introduce mindfulness and social and emotional learning to enhance both student and teacher wellbeing. The teachers canvassed at the school are cautiously optimistic about teaching mindfulness with most of them not having had any previous experience of personal mindfulness.

## 16th – 22nd February 2017 – Mangilaluk School, Tuktoyaktuk, NWT Canada

Mangilaluk School is a K-12 school situated in Tuktoyaktuk, a remote Inuit community inside the Arctic Circle. The enrolment of 230 comprises almost 100% indigenous students. Mindfulness was introduced into the school by the Program Support Teacher (PST) in 2015/2016 using the MindUp curriculum. Many of the teachers completed the online training. Since there has been a high turnover of staff this school year, it is not being delivered as a whole-school program. The teachers who do use mindfulness report that they see calmer classrooms, improved self-regulation skills and believe that it has helped to foster positive wellbeing across the school. The principal indicated that she would like to see it delivered in all classrooms in whatever capacity teachers are comfortable with. As well as classroom observations, I met with the school counsellor to discuss and compare the life of a counsellor in Australia with this remote and extreme area. This was a unique and exciting experience that also saw me travel across the frozen ice road between Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk.

## 22nd – 28th February 2017 – Toronto, Canada

### Meeting with Heidi Bornstein and Steve Chadwick (Mindfulness Everyday)

Heidi Bornstein is a co-founder of Mindfulness Everyday, a Toronto based non-profit charitable organization that focuses on the implementation of mindfulness programs into the education system as part of the curriculum. The visit included discussing the benefits of mindfulness for educators as well as reviewing resources and programs available to schools. Bornstein believes that good programs show relevance and that teaching the neurobiology of the brain is important to understand how stress works, and therefore how mindfulness can be used to help. She also highlights that programs need to be able to be modified to fit with the culture of the school community.

### Meeting with Leah Gardner and Amber McAuley (Mindfulness Without Borders)

Mindfulness Without Borders **(**MWB) provides evidenced-based programs on [secular mindfulness](http://www.mindfulnesswithoutborders.org/about-us/) and [social-emotional intelligence](http://www.mindfulnesswithoutborders.org/about-us/) to youth, educators, health and corporate professionals. They provide online training for educators to develop their own mindfulness practice, then training to become a facilitator of the Mindfulness Ambassador Council (MAC) program. MWB also developed the RETHINK digital kit – an online portal offering digital lessons for educators to access. .

### Clarkson Secondary School Visit, Mississauga, Ontario

Leah and Amber (MWB) took me to Clarkson Secondary School to attend a MAC session with a group of 15 students from grades 10-12. At the end of the session, participants told me that the program has been very helpful, especially in being able to learn how to think about things differently and learning the skills of mindfulness. I also met with the principal who is a strong advocate for the MWB program, indicating that the program has been beneficial to both students and teachers alike. She hopes to extend the program further next year (dependent on funding). I also met with the school’s social worker and psychologist and viewed their new “wellbeing room”.

## 1st – 8th March – London, UK

### Visit with Anne Rajakumar at Hockerill Anglo-European College, Bishop’s Stortford, UK

Hockerill Anglo-European College is an international co-educational day and boarding school for students aged 11 to 18 years. Anne Rajakumar is a language teacher who has been implementing mindfulness into her own classroom using aspects of the Mind With Heart program. The school has an after-school mindfulness club as part of the International Baccalaureate program and mindfulness has also been introduced into the Years 7 and 8 wellbeing curriculum with considerable success. I attended a lunch time mindfulness club that is also offered for all students twice per week. There were nine students in attendance from Years 10 to 13. The benefits they experience include being able to better manage their emotions, stress, anxiety and attention as they have learned to be more aware of their internal responses.

### Urban Retreat – Mindfulness on the go, London, UK

Mindfulness on the go was a half day retreat in Central London led by Adam Dacey. The morning retreat promoted engagement in gentle, relaxing mindful exercises, to help train and develop the mind to be more present, focused, peaceful and happy. It was held in an historic Quaker’s meeting house surrounded by public housing units in the northern part of the city. He led us in a variety of mindfulness activities and discussion about mindfulness. This half-day retreat provided me with an authentic formal mindfulness experience as a participant.

### Meeting with Fiona Clarke – co-founder Mind With Heart, Brighton, UK

Mind with Heart is an international education charity based in London. It supports schools in developing a whole-school approach to cultivating mindfulness and social and emotional learning through their curriculum. Experienced trainers provide a 10-week course for students as well as training for teachers. Fiona Clarke advocates that teachers of mindfulness should have their own personal mindfulness/meditation practice to provide more authentic teaching of mindfulness in the classroom. Mind With Heart was involved in the UK Parliamentary Inquiry into Mindfulness and although the ministers were keen to see mindfulness incorporated as a compulsory part of the school curriculum, mindfulness practitioners warned them against making programs compulsory. She said that schools where mindfulness programs are compulsory have had limited success.

### Meeting with Dominic Morris – mindfulness teacher (Mindfulness in Schools Project), London, UK

The Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP) was established in 2009 as a not-for-profit company by two school teachers and mindfulness practitioners. Teachers must undertake the Foundation Program first as part of their personal practice. Then, teachers who wish to teach the MiSP curriculum must do additional training in either the b Program (for 11-18-year olds) or the Paws b Program (7-11 year olds) before they are able to utilise the MiSP program and resources. He provides training to teachers in the MiSP curricula and believes that the key to the potential success of mindfulness programs in schools is to get the principal and executive team on board.

## 10th – 15th March – Perth, Australia

### Meeting with Fiona Gauntlett (Mindful Attention Training), Perth

Fiona Gauntlett is the founder of Mindful Attention Training (MAT) and designed the Tool Box for secondary students to progressively acquire life skills through the core practice of mindful attention. She acknowledges the skills of classroom teachers and matches the material to that. She believes that teachers do not require in depth personal practice, if that is reflected in what they teach and how they teach it.

### Visit to All Saints’ College, Bull Creek, WA

All Saint’s College (ASC) is a co-educational private school situated just outside Perth. I met with Sue Wilson (Senior School Psychologist) and Jen Winley, a teacher trained in the Mindful Schools program. Initially beginning as a relaxation tool for Year 12 students, the school currently has a Mindfulness Project Team that coordinates mindfulness programs across all year groups as well as a retreat program at the beginning of the year. I was given the opportunity to observe a Year 5 class being guided in a formal mindfulness class by Jen Winley. The students were very enthusiastic and engaged well in the lesson.

### Meeting with mindfulness for youth practitioners, Perth

Fiona Gauntlett has networked with several mindfulness practitioners in the Perth region and coordinated their inaugural face-to-face meeting to coincide with my visit to Perth. Each of the practitioners provide mindfulness programs or activities to young people either in private practice or within the education system. The discussions confirmed the learning I had accumulated on my study tour and provided me with a rich network of mindfulness practitioners within the Australian context.

### One-day silent retreat, Manning (Mind and Movement)

The focus of this retreat was Compassion (self and others). We experienced mindfulness activities such as mindful listening (made even more interesting by a severe storm that passed over us at the time), mindful eating, mindful walking, body scan and mindful self compassion . We were also guided through a yoga session which gave us the opportunity to engage mindfully with our physical being. This was an extremely worthwhile activity that added to my authentic learning experiences as I was able to immerse myself and observe an experienced practitioner.

### Visit to Warnbro Community High School Education Support Centre with Sama Bruce-Cullen (School Psychologist)

Warnbro Community High School is a co-educational public high school with a Support Centre for students from Years 7 to 13 with an intellectual disability. The Support Centre has developed a whole school social and emotional learning framework using a Positive Education Model – HAPEER (Health, Accomplishments, Purpose, Emotions, Engagement, Relationships). Character Strengths and Mindfulness practices are key aspects embedded throughout the model. The implementation process follows a sequence of four phases: Learn it, Live it, Teach it, Embed It. Their timeline demonstrates this process, with staff initially being provided with the training required to Learn it and Live it. Professional learning builds the capacity of the staff and allows them to truly understand the training before they deliver it to students. Teachers are then in a good position to provide the explicit teaching of the social and emotional learning curriculum.

# Conclusion

In summary, this study tour provided evidence for the importance of teaching mindfulness in schools to help foster positive mental health and wellbeing to both teachers and students alike. Mindful awareness assists young people to develop self-regulation skills so that they are better able to manage the way they respond to stimuli, including stress, in their environment. Teachers who have their own mindfulness practice will not only experience more positive wellbeing themselves, but will be able to authentically introduce these skills into their classroom.

Although a whole school approach supported by the school’s executive team is ideal, enforcing this onto teachers will not translate into success. Therefore, a gradual introduction of mindfulness into classrooms is recommended. Good programs are evidence-based and show relevance, so that students and teachers understand how stress works and how mindfulness can be used to help. Ensuring that the program fits with the culture of the school is also important.

Personal observations and the students interviewed along the way provided the most valuable evidence from this study tour. Students indicated that the benefits of learning mindfulness skills include being able to manage their emotions, stress, anxiety and attention better as they have learned to be more aware of their internal responses. This leads to better mental health outcomes including the prevention of significant mental health issues such as depression.

To date, these findings have been disseminated to school counsellors working across the whole Illawarra area as well as to school staff at several schools in the Wollongong region. I have led mindfulness sessions with student groups and provided advice to teachers keen to implement mindfulness into their classrooms. A library of resources has been established for use by school staff interested in building capacity in this area. I am completing the Mindful Schools training with a view of offering mindfulness sessions to teachers. Illawarra Sports High School has approved a pilot mindfulness program for year 7 students in Term 3 this year, by an accredited Mindful Schools instructor. In addition to this, I have created a resource card for school counsellors to use with school students and the feedback received so far is extremely positive.

The Anika Foundation Scholarship afforded me the most amazing learning opportunity for which I express my heartfelt gratitude. The breadth and depth of knowledge gained from the conference, meaningful conversations as well as first hand experiences and observations, have provided me with a deeply authentic learning experience. This was such a rich and profound journey both professionally and personally. I look forward to sharing my knowledge, to further learning, and to continuing professional connections.

# References

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# Acknowledgement of Programs and Organisations

* All Saint’s College, Bull Creek, WA
* Calmer Choice
* Center for Adolescent Studies
* Hockerill Anglo-European College, Bishop’s Statford, UK
* Inner Kids
* Jennie Elliott Elementary School, Calgary, Canada
* Mangilaluk School, NWT, Canada
* Mind and Movement
* Mind With Heart
* Mindfulness Without Borders
* Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP)
* Mindful Life Project
* Mindfulness Everyday
* Mindfulness on the go
* Mindful Schools
* Mindful Attention Training
* The Hawn Foundation (MindUp Curriculum)
* Warnbro Community High School Education Support Centre, Perth, WA