



# Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going with Mindfulness in Schools?

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## Abstract

This is a commentary on a paper by Roeser et al. entitled “Beyond all splits: Envisioning the next generation of science on mindfulness and compassion in schools for students”. The commentary endorses the main thrust of paper, the need to re-envisage mindfulness and move from the dominant model, a clinically based “mindfulness in education” approach, in which mindfulness is seen as a discrete “intervention”, an approach which has been criticised as mechanistic, atomistic, and restrictive and encourages a view of mindfulness as helping people to cope with a stressful status quo. The commentary further endorses the view that we need to create and research models of “mindfulness as education”, as a transformative “process” models which focus on the relational and developmental aspects of education, within a whole-school, ecological approach, encouraging schools to become more compassionate places, which cultivate a positive sense of agency in learners to empower them to change the social context. As well as endorsing the main thrust of the paper, this commentary includes the following further comments. Research and practice on teacher development needs to be at the heart of this process. Getting the balance right between rigour and innovation in research will be an ongoing process. It would be helpful to look outside Anglo-centric box for examples of this relational shift. We should wait to see how the somewhat unexpected results of the MYRIAD project feed into longer term reviews before changing advice around universal approaches and who should teach mindfulness in schools.

**Keywords** Mindfulness · Schools · Compassion · Education · Teacher development · Educational transformation

The Roeser et al. (2023) paper entitled “Beyond all splits: Envisioning the next generation of science on mindfulness and compassion in schools for students” offers a satisfying and coherent story for the reader, bringing together several interrelated threads in a masterful and illuminating way. It explores what research and programme development mindfulness in schools have achieved to date, provides a critique of the assumptions and limitations of this work, and from this base presents a bold and far-sighted new vision for what the future may hold, and is indeed already starting to become apparent. As one who has been involved in developing the field for 20 years, attempting to be at the cutting edge while also grounded in the real world of evidence and practice, I found it

personally and professionally highly rewarding to savour and reflect on. It has its finger firmly on the pulse of where mindfulness and compassion has been and may be going next.

The specific focus of this paper is school-based mindfulness programmes (SBMPs) for students in school settings (ages 4–18 years of age). Over the last two decades, the field has burgeoned, with work increasing across all age ranges and sectors, in preschool, 4–18, further and higher education, and with accompanying efforts to reach policy makers and parents (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2016; Weare & Huppert, 2019; Weare & Bethune, 2019). The paper is solidly grounded in a succinct description of the emergence of the practice and science of mindfulness in schools for students, from which it summarises what has been learned scientifically from experimental studies on the impacts of SBMPs on child and adolescent student outcomes in educational settings.

The paper then moves on to bring together scientific and humanistic critiques of this work, in itself a fascinating piece of synthesis, and from which emerges a new and exciting vision, which brings together mindfulness and compassion

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and “goes beyond all splits” to emphasise relationship and connection in the practice and research around mindfulness, compassion, and contemplative approaches. In what follows, I will not attempt to summarise the whole of this excellent paper but will simply reflect on aspects of it that I found particularly striking, amplify a few areas in which observations from my own experience may be helpful, and highlight a couple of areas which I feel could usefully be developed further.

## Summary of Programme Development and the Review of the Current Experimental Evidence

The Roeser et al. (2023) paper opens with an account of the emergence of the practice and science of mindfulness in schools for students over the last two decades, work which they position as building networks and research partnerships and creating a new subfield of science and educational practice. As one who has been involved in this enterprise, I found it to be a perspicacious summary of what has been happening in programme development.

The field they draw on is focused largely, as is usual at present, on work from the English-speaking world, and within that predominantly from the USA and to a lesser extent the UK. This Anglo-centric skew of the field, largely created by language, is something we have been attempting in *Mind and Life Europe* (2022) to unearth and bring together work from across Europe. We are finding this work to be a rich vein, showing much to learn from work based in other European traditions, including such as those which more naturally work within a whole-school approach in Israel (Sheinman et al., 2018), cultivating empathy and relational competences in schools in Germany (Empathie macht Schule, 2022) and the very fruitful and well-established holistic northern European concept of *Bildung* (Rowson, 2019). (*Bildung* is an old German cultural term that is currently inspiring educational change, in northern Europe in particular.) The direct translation of *Bildung* is “formation” but it there is no exact equivalent in English. When applied to education, the term implies transforming and re-imagining an education to be one which puts human development and maturation, and the rounded, fully realised individual and their relationship with their social and ecological context at the centre of the process, rather than an education which is driven by economic and technological goals. Looking outside of the Anglo-centric box, a little more may be a useful line of enquiry for the field.

The paper moves on to summarise the outcomes shown by experimental work on SBMPs in educational settings. The authors carried out their own systematic review (called here a “research brief”) which concluded that there is

“promising evidence that SBMPs can positively impact students’ mindfulness and self-regulation skills, reduce students’ internalizing distress, and improve students’ physical health and healthy relationships”. It also notes that apparent impacts on behaviour and positive wellbeing are not currently yet strong. As a regular reviewer of the evidence in the field myself throughout the period of its development, I found their review very much aligned with two recent assessments I conducted as well (Weare, 2019; Weare & Bethune, 2019). The authors comment that developments in the field are running ahead of the evidence. This is inevitable and desirable—we need freedom to think outside the box and be innovative and creative, while also keeping an eye on authenticity and evidence, a tension this paper amply illustrates with its later focus on new directions. Getting the balance right between the two will always be a creative process for us to continue explore. The Mindfulness Initiatives’ ground-breaking *Fieldbook for Mindfulness Innovators* (Sangvi et al., 2019) examines the issue in some detail.

## What We Can Learn from MYRIAD

Within their review of the evidence, Roeser et al. (2023) comment specifically on what they summarise as a lack of impact on student mental health of the recently published, large, well-funded, and high-profile MYRIAD trial in the UK. The initial effect of the publication in both the media and the world of mindfulness of a clutch of papers in a special edition of the *British Medical Journal* (MYRIAD, 2022a) was firmly negative, focusing mainly on the lack of impact on depression in students (the main outcome measure) (Kuyken et al., 2022a). The resultant negativity towards universal approaches and the competence of classroom teachers to deliver mindfulness, flowing outwards in some quarters to mindfulness in schools in general, risks becoming a simple dominant tone from this many-faceted trial. But we have a great deal to learn, including many positives and many unanswered questions, from the large and complex group of papers it has produced. Some more nuanced responses are now emerging (Boyce, 2022) and as a UK academic who is being called on to write and comment on the trial (Weare & Ormston, 2022), a few further reflections, that relate closely to the themes of the Roeser et al., (2023) paper, may be helpful to an international audience. I would emphasise that these are our own reflections at the Mindfulness Initiative, not a comprehensive summary of the findings and we would recommend that the original MYRIAD papers are closely read.

The authors of MYRIAD comment that the findings on student outcomes “were not what we predicted” (MYRIAD, 2022b, p.1). They are not explicit about what was not as predicted, but it is notable that the findings were not in line

with the impact of the intervention on these outcomes shown in the feasibility study for the trial (Kuyken et al., 2013). The feasibility study showed small impacts on mental health and wellbeing in a control trial of 522 students of the intervention used in the much larger trial. Nor were the findings in line with the overall drift of the current evidence, as Roeser et al. (2023) note based on their own recent review. The notable lack of engagement of the students (Montero-Marin et al., 2022) was also not in line with the 7.5/10 overall average acceptability of the programme reported by students in the feasibility study (Kuyken et al., 2013), and the usual figures for schools-based mindfulness interventions.

In addition, it may be significant that the teachers involved in the large trial who delivered the intervention to students only attained, on average, a very basic level of competence. In the trial, the teachers who fell below the level of competence (e.g., implementation quality) were nevertheless included in the findings. One wonders whether the methodological demands of the trial which meant that all teachers had to be included, while all the teachers and the schools had to be new to mindfulness (Montero-Marin et al., 2021) may partly account for why the results were so different from when the intervention was delivered by experienced and committed teachers in the feasibility trial. While these design decisions in the larger trial all are understandable in research terms, this is not how the programme has traditionally been delivered in schools.

The MYRIAD trial is thus perhaps a useful case to consider for those of us who are researchers and who are focused on scaling of programmes and study power and rigorous methodology in this area of research—these approaches necessarily need to be considered alongside the considerable issue of insuring high-quality programme implementation in assessing impacts (e.g., Baelen et al., 2023). On a policy level, the MYRIAD trial may suggest that trying rapidly to scale up a programme shown to be successful on a relatively small scale may not be an appropriate way to spread SBMT effectively to students. For all of us in the field, the findings of this trial challenge us to consider how to allow mindfulness to develop naturally and locally, tailored to specific contexts, in its own good time, using teachers who are naturally drawn to it and thus more likely to enact the all-important authenticity and embodiment needed to be effective (Crane et al., 2017). Meanwhile, we should proceed with caution and see how the MYRIAD results feed into longer term reviews and meta-analyses of the field before taking drastic actions.

Less publicised but important findings from the trial were the positive impacts on teacher wellbeing in terms of burn-out, the significance of teacher competence in delivering the student programme on the impact of the programme on students, and the impact of the programme on teacher perceptions of a positive school climate (Kuyken et al., 2022b).

These are all issues known to be vital, not only for mindfulness in schools, but for student wellbeing and teacher effectiveness in schools in general (Weare & Bethune, 2019). We return to them later in the commentary.

## Looking Forward: A Summary of Scientific and Humanistic Critiques of This Work and What It Suggests for Future Work

The second half of the paper moves into innovative and highly important territory. A significant contribution of this paper is to deepen the debate and make visible what is usually left invisible, the taken-for-granted meta-theoretical assumptions, theories, and methods that underpin practice and research around mindfulness in schools. It clarifies in the process that there are many approaches, models, and possibilities, not just those that are currently most developed, and that all have implications for how we frame and understand students as learners and the nature of education.

### Mindfulness in Education as an “Intervention”

Drawing on critiques from a range of authors, Roeser et al. (2023) make explicit the assumptions and underlying characteristics of the currently dominant model of research, what Ergas (2019) has catchily termed “mindfulness *in* education”. This model introduces mindfulness from the outside and sees the task of mindfulness research in schools as the assessment of “outcomes” for individuals, as a direct, mechanistic, and linear result of discrete “interventions”, and usually encapsulated into an instruction manual or curriculum with requirements of programme fidelity. It is a process that either “works” or does not, ideally evaluated by a large scale, methodologically rigorous randomised control trial. In line with the origins of secular mindfulness in the world of medicine, it is a model drawn from clinical contexts in the testing of medicines and therapies.

In the spirit of avoiding “splits”, we must recognise the utility of this model of mindfulness *in* education. It has given mindfulness a strong and measurable credibility without which it would have no presence, and on which future developments can be built. However, as the various critiques skilfully summarised here suggest, it is also a mechanistic, atomistic, restrictive, and sometimes less useful model, drawn from a clinical background, and not from an educational or organizational context. It cannot hope to provide a complete picture when it comes to understanding a complex, social, educational, and developmental process such as teaching mindfulness and compassion to students in a complex, interconnected, buzzing, blooming, ever-changing, educational environment such as a school.

Roeser et al. (2023) take the critique further into the real world and bring together the argument, being made in many quarters, that the mindfulness *in* education model has unseen and real life if unintended consequences for individuals and for our understanding of the purpose of education. It can be seen as unwittingly supporting a toxic status quo we may wish to challenge. It suggests for example that mindfulness is about alleviating individual suffering and building “resilience” in the face of stress. Recent re-envisioning of mindfulness is reconceptualising its purpose as building a sense of positive agency and social connection to challenge social contexts and contribute to social change. This reconceptualization is outlined in recent reports and guidance for the Mindfulness Initiative in the UK, for example *Implementing Mindfulness in Schools* (Weare & Bethune, 2019) and *Mindfulness: Developing Agency in Urgent Times* (Bristow & Bell, 2020). Roeser et al. (2023) draw together important critiques made by those such as Thompson (2020) who suggests that the approach encourages “selfish individualism” presenting mindfulness as a “private practice” and a “self-help commodity”, in turn reinforcing a view of education as entirely concerned with economic and personal gain of individuals, helping them succeed against the odds, rather than challenging and critiquing the status quo and its inequalities.

### Holistic, Relational, and Transformational Models of Mindfulness

The critiques Roeser et al. summarise, coming from several major thinkers, both challenge these reductionist assumptions, and point to alternative models of mindfulness. The authors particularly like the summary term used by Ergas (2019) of “mindfulness *as* education”, an approach which “is more culturally and ecologically grounded and focused on personal and social transformation—specifically, the transformation of educational settings themselves” (Roeser et al. (2023)). It is a complex area, with many bedfellows, and the adjectives Roeser et al. (2023) offer in describing an emergent paradigm include *relational, contextual, social, transformative, developmental, grounded, ethical, holistic, non-linear, non-additive, embodied, organic, systems thinking, drawing on living systems*, and “*going beyond all splits*”. They summarise:

“a shift from split to relational meta-theoretical assumptions shifts the theoretical and methodological focus towards thinking about whole persons—their agency, motivations, and stage-specific developmental needs (as well as how well their social environments address such needs). Such a perspective also serves to orient theory and method towards contexts, relationships, social interaction, shared activity, and cultural

practices in the development of mindful and compassionate children and adolescents”.

The complexity and density of the language reminds us that finding a single term for this is near impossible, although the simple terms I will use here to sum it up are *holistic, relational, and transformational*.

### Realising the Holistic, Relational, and Transformational Model

The latter parts of the paper explore how this holistic, relational, and transformational model might be conceptualised and realised. The focus and the detail are mainly on what Roeser et al. (2023) call a “developmental” or “relational” approach to mindfulness, one in which mindfulness is seen not as a lone pursuit but as a social process, learned through interaction across the lifespan. As they summarise:

“Such a meta-theory leads to theories of mindfulness that conceptualize it first and foremost as an intergenerational social practice—as something being worked out with other people, in specific settings, through language and gesture, intergenerational relationships and joint activity around cultural practices (e.g., meditation, service), over a sustained period of time in the lifespan”.

The paper outlines in some detail on how this vision may be realised through the life of a child; a deep dive is extremely helpful in illustrating to the reader how the vision might look in reality.

Alongside the developmental and relational approach, they also suggest a wider ecological approach which integrates mindfulness into the school as a cultural system:

“...the implementation of mindfulness as a school-wide practice, where it is integrated into the culture and life of a whole school and involves both teachers and students”

To me, one minor lack of clarity in the paper is whether we are discussing the development and evaluation of relationally based, but nevertheless discrete, mindfulness programmes and practices for individual students, or if we are exploring how mindfulness and compassion can be integrated into systemic, whole-school, ecological approaches that take in the entirety of the school culture and processes. Both approaches are presented as vital, but there is more detail on the former, and it would be good to see the relationship between these two possibilities articulated, clarified, and further developed in later work.

The issue of developing whole-school, ecological approaches is close to my heart, having worked on this issue most of my adult life. We now have good deal of experience

of trying to develop wellbeing at a whole-school level, working with concepts such as “*whole-school approaches*”, “*healthy schools*”, and the aforementioned *Bildung*. We are clear that, when well implemented, holistic approaches have proved to be more effective in producing sustainable change than individualised approaches and discrete interventions, and we have growing clarity on the essential components (Weare & Nind, 2011). There is much that could be said, but I will confine my final set of comments to a particular aspect of the whole-school change process raised briefly by Roeser et al. (2023) and the paper by Baelen et al. (2023) they cite, and which the evidence strongly supports—the influence of the teachers themselves, and their skills, motivations, and understandings.

### The Role of Teachers

In the paper we are discussing here, the role of teachers gets a brief mention.

“there is strong evidence mindfulness works for improving teachers’ occupational health and wellbeing, and accumulating research suggests that teacher programs also have impacts on how teachers interact with students in the classroom (see Klingbeil et al., 2017). More research is needed on how training educators can have indirect downstream consequences on student outcomes”.

I would suggest that if we want to realise these new holistic, relational, and transformative paradigms for research in this area, the evidence suggests that this whole issue of teacher professional development needs to move to the front and centre. Teacher wellbeing and effectiveness is starting to be the focus of research trials, being brought together in a small clutch of systematic reviews. Recent evidence reviews (e.g., Hwang et al., 2017; Klingbeil & Renshaw, 2018) suggest that we are starting to see some potentially transformative effect of mindfulness, both on the wellbeing of the teacher, and their effectiveness in the relational tasks of teaching. My reading of the recent evidence suggests that whatever model of mindfulness we are working within, be it mindfulness *in* or *as* education, the attitudes and competences of the teachers are at the heart of the process. Moreover, if our intention is to shift the perspective from mindfulness *in* education/as an intervention, to mindfulness *as* education/as a developmental and relational process, we need to make central the relational skills of the people at the heart of the school, and cultivate the attitudes, motivations, skills, and capacities of the faculty/teachers to support and deliver this shift. As Greenberg, a scientific advisor to MYRIAD and leader in the field, as well as one of the authors on the paper being commented on here, suggests:

“*The one area in education in which mindfulness has repeatedly been shown to be successful is with the teachers, including in the MYRIAD research. I would suggest, then, that a good place to start in helping schools become more caring places where children can explore their inner worlds is with the adults*”. (Greenberg, quoted in Boyce, 2022).

Some of the relational effects noted in recent reviews include deepening the relationship with students through a greater sense of authentic presence and empathy, putting the learner at the heart of teaching and learning, and encouraging students towards self-knowledge. The relational theory Roeser et al. (2023) propose, of mindfulness as socially learned from what they term “competent adults”, throughout the lifespan, and supported and integrated into school culture and life, puts mainstream teachers, the entire school faculty, and school leadership at the very centre. Teachers are the only competent adults who have a long-term, embedded relationship with their students, and whom we can hope to influence. They are the main agents of socialisation and shaping the climate and environment in which the students operate. Teaching is at root a relational occupation, founded on the ability to manage one’s own emotions and behaviour, communicate effectively, motivate others, handle complex social situations including conflict, and make warm and authentic relationships—all capacities that mindfulness cultivates.

MYRIAD, (2022c) came to the same conclusion in its brief bullet point summary “*where next*”:

*Implementing any social-emotional learning curriculum in schools requires committed staff, adequate resources, efforts to address misperceptions about mindfulness and social-emotional learning, and training and ongoing support of teachers. It may be that such curricula are only effective when all these conditions are in place.*

So, a vital direction for research to underpin the developmental and relational approach outlined in Roeser et al. (2023) is to clarify what is needed in terms of cultivating teacher attitudes and skills that support high-quality programme implementation and student–teacher interactions in the classroom. This is not totally simple, and requires a nuanced response. For teachers actively engaged at the forefront of teaching mindfulness and compassion to students, we need to determine what type, length and intensity of preparation, and further ongoing support is needed to produce an adequately competent teacher, with the personal practice and skills to both embody these skills in teaching practice and convey authentic mindfulness to students effectively through curriculum (Crane et al., 2017; Shapiro et al., 2016; Nhat Hanh & Weare, 2017). This does not however mean that all adults in the school will practise

lengthy mindfulness meditation. Work on mindfulness and compassion is moving from the idea that it is just about lengthy seated meditation practice, which is only ever going to appeal to a few people, and instead focusing on its core role as a set of attitudes and values—the values of presence, attention, curiosity, open mindedness, kindness, and compassion—within the school ethos and processes.

## Conclusion: Position Mindfulness as Core to Educational Transformation

The core aim of the Roeser et al. (2023) paper is:

re-envisioning assumptions, theories, and methods in research to go “beyond all splits” towards a non-dualistic and relationally, culturally, contextually, ethically, and developmentally grounded science on mindfulness and compassion for students in schools.

Growing evidence and experience suggest that, as a foundational human capacity, this kind of relational and systemic mindfulness can be central to efforts being made to help transform whole classroom/school/university climates to help students and teachers to cultivate deep and authentic learning, self-knowledge, wellbeing and flourishing, critical skills, and to become more compassionate and connected.

The relevance of this vision goes well beyond mindfulness in schools. It applies to work on mindfulness and compassion across education, and indeed out into the role of mindfulness in social action and social change. The vision of this paper joins an international conversation proposing and trying out new models for mindfulness that bring mindfulness into clear relationship with compassion and make it foundational to the cultivation of a sense of agency and connection, with our inner mind/body processes, with our own complex wholeness, with our relationships with others, and with the society, culture, and ecosystem within which we live (Bristow & Bell, 2020; Weare & Bethune, 2019).

To meet the urgent challenges and crises that face the human race, and indeed the whole ecosystem that makes up our planet as a whole, many are recognising that we need profound, root and branch, educational transformation. We need to an education that can help us to become more flexible, discerning, critical thinkers, and compassionate, connected, embodied, caring, and socially minded citizens, with the strength and qualities that enable us to make proactive and wise choices to influence and take an active part in decision-making; have courage, confidence, hope, and optimism; and to survive and even flourish in the face of rapidly moving social, technological, and ecological developments. The drive is now to move the transformational, relational, and holistic approach that Roeser et al. (2023) outline to the

centre and heart of education—the vision of mindfulness and compassion they envisage has a foundational part to play.

## Declarations

**Ethics Approval** The manuscript does not consist of original clinical studies or patient data; it is a commentary.

**Conflict of Interest** The author declares no competing interests.

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