



Embodied Presence

A Heuristic Inquiry into Mindfulness Teachers' Experiences of Authenticity

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Introduction

Interest, development and application of MBI's has burgeoned since the inception of the MBSR programme. This growth is increasing the demand for professionals with the competencies required to effectively deliver MBI's. Given the responsibility the teacher carries in preserving the integrity, quality and standards of practice in service of successful outcomes for participants, it is becoming increasingly important to establish clarity and consensus in the identification of these competencies, how they are demonstrated in practice and what processes and structures are required to support teachers to cultivate them.

The last few years has seen the inclusion of pedagogical theoretical literature devoted specifically to exploring the role of the teacher however, to date, a significant empirical gap exists regarding the influence of the person of the teacher. This is surprising given the quality and integrity of a MBI is "only as good as the teacher".

During the time I was searching for a meaningful research question I attended an Insight Dialogue retreat and on the penultimate day the topic of Authenticity emerged whilst I was engaged in dialogic meditative practice. This way of being, vividly connected to myself and present in relationship felt vital, liberating, effortless, a standing in my truth, outside of any role. I touched into a quiet sense of authority borne out of fully trusting the unfolding moments of my organismic experience, 'being all that I am' and 'being fully in relationship'. I came to apprehend this as a direct experience of authenticity, lived both intrapersonally and interpersonally.

Given this experience and my experiences as a mindfulness teacher, I was interested to determine whether other teachers who also have an interpersonal practice may have had similar experiences of authenticity in their teaching. This led me to explore the relevance of authenticity in teaching mindfulness, and in particular the influence of the person of the teacher. I considered the MBI (TAC) competencies associated with teacher effectiveness and focused particularly on the two areas where authenticity features most distinctly: (i) embodiment, a "critical way in which the teacher communicates authenticity". It is emphasized as a core competency in almost all of the pedagogical literature. (ii) relational skills.

The two questions that arose from my initial investigation were: (i) what would the impact on participants be if the teacher has a limited capacity to be embodied in relationship and (ii) could this be a significant factor in outcomes?

Research Findings

Themes and sub-themes that crystallized from the analysis :

- Authenticity: Trusting the flow of Being
- Presence: Choosing Authenticity
Being Here, Now
Being Wide Open
Being Receptive and Responsive
- Transmission of the Teaching
Embodiment: Being the Teaching
Inter-subjectivity: When Human Beings meet
Letting go of Being Somebody
Bearing Witness Faithfully
- Fear: A narrowing of Being

Methods

Moustakas developed heuristic methodology, a systematic phenomenological process aimed at discovering the nature and meaning of a particular aspect of human existence. I followed Sela-Smith's revised two-phase approach.

Phase one is characterised by self-search, an intrapersonal process aimed at staying with the experiencing self to facilitate self-discovery. The process begins with and is founded on the researcher's experience: the initial data is within the researcher therefore their direct lived experience is central to research integrity. Within the interiority of self lies a wealth of embodied knowledge that has been assimilated and integrated over the lifetime of the researcher's experiences. The Greek root of the word heuristic means to discover or find. With the support of a number of self-reflective processes, the researcher is invited to venture into the uncharted territory of self to discover this personal knowledge.

Phase two, the interpersonal process, began after resolution of phase one. I interviewed four teachers and their participation supported a broadening of awareness and understanding.

In fulfilment of the purpose of the research data from both sources were integrated to provide a rich and multi-faceted description of the lived experience of Authenticity.

Creative Synthesis

Trusting the River of Rising Life

A voice from deep within my Being
A call to an adventure of the soul
Let go and swim in the stream of life
Trust its emergent flow

Go to places where tenderness lives
Where doubt casts its shadow
Nakedly present with nowhere to hide
Oh the beauty of this human kind

Eyes that see and a heart that opens
Ears that listen to the song of Being
Trust me dear One, trust me
Let your authentic truth be known

Behold the face of a kindred Being
A reflection of all that you are
Heed not the messengers of fear
The warmth of compassion is here

Release the ego from its role
The purveyor of separation and decree
Open boundlessly to the miracle of life
Receive the joy of Authenticity

Conclusion

This research study aimed to investigate experiences of authenticity as an intrapersonal and interpersonal phenomenon. The fact that all of the participants, including the primary researcher, have a personal and interpersonal mindfulness practice offered the unique opportunity to explore whether the embodiment of these practices might support being authentic with self and others in the relational context of teaching mindfulness. The findings offer compelling support for this. The intrapersonal and interpersonal dimensions of authenticity were highlighted and the relational process of presence emerged as a factor that supports the choice for authenticity.

Further research that acknowledges the fundamentally relational nature of MBI programmes would help to raise awareness of the influence of the person of the teacher and move the potentiality of the teacher-student relationship into the foreground of mindfulness pedagogy. This could support a refinement in current teacher training practices and potentially increase positive outcomes for participants.

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