

BUDDHIST FOUNDATIONS OF TEACHING

Zane MA RHEA
Faculty of Education, Monash University, Melbourne, Australia

Abstract

This paper reports on research conducted 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 education curriculum with Buddhist worldview in the first school in Australia being guided by Buddhist philosophy. Although there has been a concerted research agenda within the sociology of education internationally that has focussed on teachers and the comparative impacts of globalisation, culture and religion on their work, there has been little attention paid to the particular impact of Buddhism, even though this sphere of education is growing globally.

This research is a descriptive, interpretative study of the narratives of teachers about their views and understandings of Buddhism in their new school, and the impact of Buddhism on their teaching. The key research question asks 'In what ways does a Buddhist perspective change mainstream teaching practice in Australia?'

This paper will focus the theme of *The Foundational Elements of Teaching* which were identified as being: its pioneering school status and its conflict management practices that focus on self-responsibility and compassionate communication with others as foundational behaviors for creating a peaceful, mindful school culture of belonging.

The findings suggest that there are similarities with other start-up schools regardless of the influence of Buddhist philosophy in terms of the need for planning and leadership that involves teachers. What is distinct about this school is that, unlike other Buddhist inspired schools with available comparative research, this is not a faith-based school. This has posed particular challenges, and freedoms, for teachers.

Key Words

Dharma; Buddhist philosophy; pioneer school; behavior management; conflict management; mindful belonging.

Introduction

This paper examines 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 education curriculum with a Buddhist worldview in the first mainstream school in Australia to be guided by Buddhist philosophy and Dharma practices. Australia has an educational history founded on Christian mission schools and of the development of a secular education system still predominantly influenced by the Christian religions and a popular humanism. Australia's emergence into the postcolonial era as a multicultural society with immigration from many countries has led to a variety of faith and culturally based schools to be established. The Buddhist religion is finding a presence within Australia (Croucher, 1989; Smith, 2010). There have been some attempts to establish schools within Buddhist temples (for example, Chenrezig Institute in Queensland) but this study focuses on the Daylesford Dharma School, a school that has been founded within the mainstream education system in Victoria, Australia.



About the school

The Daylesford Dharma School was established in 2009 arising out of many discussions between a Tibetan monk, Geshe Konchok Tsering, the Dharma School's founder and the school director. Geshe 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 and the School Director worked to develop the articulated values of the school with a community of interested parents. They formulated the following as their guide:

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.

This seemingly simple expression of the school values has posed an ongoing challenge for the teachers as they attempt to articulate their emerging teaching philosophy. Most are non-Buddhists but have been willing to work under the guidance of the school founders as they have worked through all of the aspects of their professional work.

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 therefore does not explicitly teach the rituals and practices associated with the religious elements of Buddhism. This has been important for the school as a mainstream school employing teachers who have been trained in mainstream universities. It was common for the teachers to find themselves trying to work out how to be philosophically guided by Buddhism alongside the requirements for them to fulfil all the expectations on them as regular teachers helping their students to achieve the Victorian Essential Learning Standards (VELS) on which they would be examined.

Research Approach

This research is a descriptive, interpretative case 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 and sociological research traditions, in using a case-study as a methodological approach and as a research strategy drawing on the principles of participatory action research.

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 Director¹, a long-time Buddhist 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.

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

In what ways does a Buddhist perspective change mainstream teaching practice in Australia?

The three 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?

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

Key findings

Three key themes emerge from the analysis: Foundational Elements of Teaching, the Contextual Conditions, and Teacher Adaptivity. This paper will focus on the first them, the Foundational Elements of Teaching which were identified as having impact namely: its pioneering school status and its conflict management practices (for a fuller version of this paper, please refer to Ma Rhea (2012).

¹ In this paper the Director of the school is identified as the Director with her permission but all other informants have taken a pseudonym.

Foundational Elements of the Teaching Culture

A Pioneer School

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 liked the idea of a school that was to be shaped in some way by Buddhist philosophy. While beyond the scope of this study, according to the informants for this study, the founding parent group have played a pivotal role in the development of the ethos of school. 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. The school opened in Term 1, 2009.

Conflict Resolution through Self-Awareness and Compassionate Communication

Of foundational importance to the new school 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 (see for example, Kraft, 1992). 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.

The teachers spent considerable time within their professional development discussions and in their planning, trying to work out how to change their teaching and learning approach through the use of meditation, both for themselves and the children. There is not a lot of guidance on how to teach the techniques of meditation appropriately to children and in this, as with many other things, they were pioneering discussion about such aspects of their pedagogy. Drawing on the work of Cayton (2011), Smith & Seah (2008) and the Maitreya School handbook from Bodhgaya, India, Heruka and Thelma developed a program of Daily Body Awareness. They explain:

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?

In this way, they explained that ‘We are getting a culture going’.

An example of the bullying and harassment policy

In parallel with the more detailed work being done by the teachers to bring into being the articulated values of the school, the school founders and parents also developed two distinctive policies, a [Bullying & Harassment Policy](#) and a [Conflict Resolution Policy](#), that they hoped would provide the influence of a Buddhist thinking about conflict. This work directly supported the work of the teachers as they were laying the foundations for their expression of Buddhism in their daily work. 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.

As a more structural way of achieving this, the Director and the teachers agreed to adopt the approach known as Non Violent Communication (NVC). They reported that its adaptation as the Compassionate Communication method was “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.

The teachers were also expected to model the Five Precepts (the Buddhist guiding principles for living). As the Director explained,

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.



This presented significant challenges in the early days when the school did not yet have a very strong unifying culture and a number of teachers left. Discussions with the participants indicated that the expectation that teachers went beyond modelling these precepts to being held accountable for them outside the school as they went about their private lives within the small community was not acceptable to some. There were examples such as the one of students challenging teachers about them being seen drinking in the local pub on the weekend and thereby breaking the precept about mindful consumption. While the impact of Buddhism for the participants within their private lives goes beyond the scope of this paper, it was an often spoken about challenge faced by the school in the first two years about how much the school could expect the staff to live by the principles that they were asked to model within the school every day.

Discussion of Findings

Foundational considerations

Data analysis from this small study suggests that the school shares many of the characteristics of a start-up school, regardless of whether it is a Buddhist-inspired school or not. Agterhuis (2007) reports on the development of a new school in Point Lonsdale. She (2007, p.6) notes that 'positive school cultures correlate strongly with increased student achievement and motivation and with teacher productivity and satisfaction. These school cultures are supportive, challenging, and caring'. Discussions with the Director in the current study focussed on the priority she gave to establishing a common school culture of belonging, the importance of mindfulness, and its foundational importance in developing a sustainable school. She says:

...in a new school, because there is not a palpable school culture that children can step into and follow and be the norm in, we actually had individual students the first two years. This is the first time, in our third year, that we are actually starting to see the idea of a group emerge and so you are starting to get some behaviour being shaped, based on what the consensus is amongst children.

Shaw and Swingler (2005) offer insight into how their new school established a 'values-and-belief driven school culture', pointing to the priority placed on this aspect in establishing the school in their study. It is important to note that unlike Shaw & Swingler's school or 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). 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.

Teaching Inspired by Buddhism

The capacity of the teacher group to shape and adapt to the emerging school culture has been influenced by their individual understandings of a Buddhist-inspired approach to their professional practice, guided by the policies and guides outlined above. The efforts within the staff to create a sense of belonging based on Buddhist principles in the school have not been without strain – the professional development focussed centrally on supporting the teachers in their emerging understanding of key elements of Buddhist philosophy such as mindfulness and meditation. With respect to conflict management, for example, there is now an established 'Peace Table' to where disputes are brought. The teachers, other school staff, students, and even parents have had to develop an agreed approach to behaviour management that has been a pivotal community-building process using NVC. Achieving consensus has not been easy and the teachers had played an influential role in operationalizing the processes, even as they have sought to develop their personal understanding.

Conclusion

The focus of this study has been on developing an understanding of the development of the first Buddhist-inspired mainstream school in Australia, focussing on the work of the foundational leaders and 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 5 Buddhist precepts and the Compassionate Communication method for dealing with conflict.

This study is limited by being a single case 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, postcolonial, democratic countries.

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Ethics Approval

This project was granted Monash University Ethics Approval [CF11/0559 – 2011000237] Buddhist mainstream schooling in Australia: A case study of the development of a Buddhist school in Victoria

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