

Rediscovering the Heart of School



A new format of mindfulness-based teacher education

Dr. Karlheinz Valtl

The school system will need to fundamentally change in this decade to be able to address the pressing challenges of today and meet the interests of future generations. Aside from systemic conditions, the key prerequisites of this transformation are the competencies and the mind-set of the teaching staff: their pedagogical horizon, their instructional and social-emotional skills, their personal presence and commitment, and their resilience and creativity. The transformation of schools can only succeed in collaboration with the teachers as the key actors at the interface to students and parents. Strengthening their capabilities is hence the central task of all teacher education.

Many teachers love their profession, engage deeply with it, and experience it as a source of personal growth, meaning, and fulfillment. At the same time, they face daily challenges and often feel overwhelmed and left alone. They encounter the paradoxes of the school system, society's unfulfillable expectations, and the lack of consensus among colleagues. Additionally, they are confronted with the disregard of their work and the pedagogical naiveté of the general public.

For many educators this results in having the desire for support through:

- collegial exchange, emotional support, and practical inspiration
- regeneration and building resilience against stress, as well as
- support on the path to personal growth and professional mastery.

In these three areas, the annual group *Rediscovering the Heart of School* aims to provide teachers with continuous personalized support within a collegial circle of trust.

Scientific Background

The scientific foundation of our work is the *Pedagogy of Mindfulness*, as developed in the project *Mindfulness in Teacher Education and Schools* (Achtsamkeit in Lehrer:innenbildung und Schule, ALBUS) at the University of Vienna.¹ This approach innovatively integrates insights from educational science, mindfulness research, and teacher education. The most fundamental basis for this work is the research findings on mindfulness and compassion, as they demonstrate that mindfulness and compassion have a wide-ranging positive influence on teaching², pedagogical relationships³, social and emotional learning⁴, and academic performance⁵. They promote

attention⁶, emotion regulation⁷, self-competence⁸ as well as physical and mental health⁹, both among students and teachers. Beyond this foundation, our project is in alignment with the *Inner Development Goals*¹⁰ following the United Nations' sustainability goals, the meaning-oriented developmental psychology of adulthood¹¹, and research on human flourishing.¹²

Work Methods and Process

From a practical standpoint, our work is characterized by four person-centered core methodologies:

- development of social and personal competencies through *mindfulness* and *compassion* practice¹³
- exploration of one's own (professional) experience through *contemplative inquiry*¹⁴
- promotion of presence, self-regulation, and resilience through *meditation*¹⁵, and
- *exchange of ideas*¹⁶ within a collegial circle of trust, aiming at personal wholeness, authenticity, and integrity of teaching professionals.

These methodologies promote teachers' personal development, and at the same time form the basis for transforming schools. Both

of these dimensions enrich each other. Personal transformation nourished by professional experience is a central element of professional self-fulfillment: „*We are not merely what we do, but what we become by what we do.*“¹⁷

The procedure of the annual group includes four essential elements:

- monthly *meetings* of 3 hours each from October to June (choice between online or in-person group with 12-16 participants each)
- *weekly prompts*: texts and exercises with opportunities for reflection and exchange (online)
- a *classroom observation* with debriefing or, alternatively, online coaching
- development and implementation of a personal *project* with students, parents, etc.

Additionally, *Open Theme Evenings* with external speakers take place several times per year, accessible to both the participants in the annual group and the general public. All project offerings are free of charge in the spirit of the *gift economy*¹⁸: participants pass on the value of the course according to the principle *pay it forward*—for example, through their own projects. »

Themes



MINDFUL TEACHING

- 1. Listening and Dialogue**
Listening and dialogue are the elementary foundations of human interaction and mindful teaching.
- 2. Pausing**
Pausing creates space for the reflection of subjective experience as the basis of contemplative learning.
- 3. Recognition**
Recognition, kindness, and benevolence are the central factors of pedagogical relationships.

SOCIAL LEARNING

- 4. School Culture and Classroom Climate**
School communities and classrooms are social living spaces and shape all learning processes.
- 5. Transformative Learning**
Social, emotional, and ethical learning forms the foundation of holistic, transformative education.
- 6. Self-regulation**
Attention and emotion regulation are crucial for students' and teachers' success in learning and in life.

TEACHER AS PERSON

- 7. Self-Care**
Caring for oneself is the foundation of long-term health in the teaching profession and of caring for students.
- 8. Presence**
Physical, emotional, and mental presence in the classroom are fundamental prerequisites for authentic encounters.
- 9. Being and Identity**
The teaching profession promotes our personal development with the goal: What we teach is who we are.

» **What is new about this project?**

The *Heart of School* approach integrates four innovative elements of teacher education, which have been developed and used independently in recent years, but have not yet been integrated together:

1. the integration of the horizons of *educational science and mindfulness research* in teacher education¹⁹
2. the application of *Contemplative Inquiry* as a methodological basis for reflecting on educational practice and the inherent personal attitudes in teacher education²⁰
3. the *“Pod” format*: continuous web-based interactions plus brief meetings at longer intervals to initiate and support the processes of individual insight and transformation²¹, as well as
4. personal counseling through either in-class observation or coaching informed by the mindfulness-based approach of *Core Reflection*.²²

These four elements form a coherent whole, intended to be progressively simplified and distilled to its core components over time. The goal is to transform it into an easily replicable format for a free, part-time, network-based, and institutionally independent teacher education program. A team of instructors is currently being formed. For additional details, please visit herz-der-schule.at or sign up for our [newsletter](#).



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is founder and head of the project *Rediscovering the Heart of School* and formerly was Senior Lecturer at the University of Vienna, Scientific Director of the Master’s program in *Mindfulness in Education, Counseling, and Healthcare* at KPH Vienna, and Head of the *Mindfulness in Teacher Education and Schools (ALBUS)* project at the University of Vienna

Notes

- 1 Cf. Weghaupt, D. (2024). Achtsamkeit und pädagogische Professionalität in der Lehrer:innenbildung, Bielefeld: transcript.
- 2 Cf. Hirshberg, M. J. / Flook, L. / Enright, R. D. / Davidson, R. J. (2020) Integrating mindfulness and connection practices into preservice teacher education improves classroom practices. In: Learning and Instruction, Vol 66, 2020, 101298.
- 3 Cf. Vogel, D. / Rüst, M. (2023) Besser unterrichten durch Beziehung. Hamburg: scolix.
- 4 Cf. Jennings, P. A. / Greenberg, M. T. (2009) The Prosocial Classroom: Teacher Social and Emotional Competence in Relation to Student and Classroom Outcomes. Review of Educational Research, 79(1), 491–525.
- 5 Cf. Taylor, R. D. / Oberle, E. / Durlak, J. A. / Weiss-

berg, R. P. (2017) Promoting Positive Youth Development Through School-Based Social and Emotional Learning Interventions: A Meta-Analysis of Follow-Up Effects. *Child development*, Vol.88(4), pp.1156-1171.

- 6 Cf. Sumantry, D. / Stewart, K. E. (2021) Meditation, mindfulness, and attention: A meta-analysis. *Mindfulness*, 12, 1332-1349.
- 7 Cf. Leyland, A., Rowse, G., & Emerson, L. M. (2019) Experimental effects of mindfulness inductions on self-regulation: Systematic review and meta-analysis. *Emotion*, 19(1), 108.
- 8 Cf. Ostafin, B. D., Robinson, M. D., & Meier, B. P. (Eds.) (2015) *Handbook of mindfulness and self-regulation*. New York: Springer.
- 9 Cf. Valtl, K. (2021) Achtsamkeits- und mitgeföhlsbasierte Methoden zur Förderung von Lehrer:innen-gesundheit. In: National Center of Competence für Psychosoziale Gesundheitsförderung (hepi) (Hrsg.), *Gesundsein und Gesundbleiben im Schulalltag*, Wien 2021, S. 175-194. [Open source](#).
- 10 Cf. <https://innerdevelopmentgoals.org/framework/>
- 11 Cf. e. g. Kegan, R. (1994) *Die Entwicklungsstufen des Selbst: Fortschritte und Krisen im menschlichen Leben*, Kindt-Verlag sowie das Werk von Viktor Frankl.
- 12 Cf. <https://centerhealthyminds.org/science/the-healthy-minds-framework>.
- 13 Zur Praxis aktuell Cf. Sandbothe, M. / Albrecht, R. / Ostermayer, H. (2023) *Achtsamkeiten. Übungen für mich, für uns und für die Welt*, Bielefeld: Fischer & Gann.
- 14 Cf. Valtl, K. (2022) *Contemplative Inquiry als zentrales Setting der LehrerInnenbildung*. [Open source](#).
- 15 Cf. als Überblick Sedlmeier, P. (2016) *Die Kraft der Meditation: Was die Wissenschaft darüber weiß*. Reinbek: Rowohlt.
- 16 Cf. <https://couragerenewal.org/courage-renewal-approach/>
- 17 Nipun Mehta, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mfwwQCdqdWI>
- 18 Cf. <https://www.dailygood.org/story/644/giftivism-reclaiming-the-priceless-pavithra-mehta/>
- 19 This approach was first practically tested by D. Shirley & E. MacDonald, but they did not pursue it further



The group room on Strozzigasse in Vienna (at the practice of Dirk Meints and Klaus Kirchmayr)

- after the following boom in mindfulness research. Cf. Shirley, D. / MacDonald, E. (2009) *The Mindful Teacher*, New York/London: Teachers College Press. The theory was provided a decade later by Ergas, O. (2017). *Reconstructing ‘Education’ Through Mindful Attention: Positioning the Mind at the Center of Curriculum and Pedagogy*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- 20 This form of reflection partly comes from the Circles of Trust approach, see Palmer, P. J. (2004) *A Hidden Wholeness: The Journey Toward an Undivided Life. Welcoming the soul and weaving community in a wounded world*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. – Its fundamental significance for teacher education has only been systematically elaborated in recent years, see, for example, Bai, H., Morgan, P., Scott, C., & Cohen, A. (2018) *Holistic-contemplative pedagogy for twenty-first century teacher education as healing*. In: *International Handbook of Holistic Education*, pp. 108-117.
 - 21 The "Pod" format was developed by ServiceSpace during the COVID-19 pandemic as an integration of meetings and online prompts in free (or, more precisely: “pay it forward”) courses, see <https://pod.servicespace.org/host/>, and it is being transferred to teacher education for the first time here.
 - 22 Core Reflection is a potential-oriented coaching approach that is applied internationally in teacher education, see Korthagen, F. / Nuijten, E. (2019) *Core Reflection. Nurturing the human potential in teachers and students*. In: *International Handbook of Holistic Education*, pp. 89-99.

Dates for 2024/2025 School Year

- **Online Group** (always held on Tuesdays):
Info-Evening: (online): 17.09.24
Group Meetings: 15.10.24 | 12.11.24 | 10.12.24 | 07.01.25 | 04.02.25 | 04.03.25 | 01.04.25 | 29.04.25 | 27.05.25
- **In-Person Group** (typically held on Wednesdays):
Info-Evening: 18.09.24
Group Meetings: 16.10.24 | 13.11.24 | 11.12.24 | 08.01.25 | 05.02.25 | 05.03.25 | 03.04.25 (Thu) | 08.05.25 (Thu) | 28.05.25
Room: *Strozzigasse 32-34, Stiege 2, Top 7, 1080 Wien*

Prompts

Open Theme Evenings