

Educational Theories Research Paper: Mindfulness in the Classroom

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INTRODUCTION

Life in 2017 (almost 2018) America is stressful to say the least. Our fellow humans and we are pressured to perform and succeed in seemingly all directions - whether it is relationships, success, physical appearance/ability - the list can really go on depending on the human. Coming to realize this, it is no surprise that, in 2016 1 in 6 Americans were prescribed psychiatric drugs. Among these drugs, “Antidepressants were most common, followed by anxiety relievers and antipsychotics” (Miller, 2016). The increase in these numbers among adolescents at the secondary education level is what is most immediately alarming as a future teacher. In my educational theory research paper, I wanted to investigate the effects of Social Emotional Learning and integrating mindfulness in the classroom to answer the question: how can mindfulness in education facilitate positive change in students anxiety levels and quality of learning in schools?

Students today have all the stresses mentioned above concerning personal life. They come to school everyday and have to maintain positive relationships with their friends and classmates, go home and do the same with their families. They have to keep up with trends, maintain their physical appearance as it correlates to society’s standards and deal with the inevitable ‘drama’ that comes with being an adolescent. Pair that with school stresses; understanding content and performing well on exams from a standardized system. And the motivation: COLLEGE. These *children’s* entire futures are on the line and the weight is bearing

heavier and heavier on their shoulders. This emotional stress is having an effect on their psychological well being and I feel that it is my responsibility as an educator to ensure my students don't break under the pressure. I hope to be hyper-aware of these aspects of my students' lives and implement studied and tested social and emotional learning strategies to improve their experience and performance. Mindfulness is an up and coming strategy which I would like to further investigate in the body of this paper.

BACKGROUND

Social Emotional Learning involves integrating thinking, feeling, and behaving in order to become aware of the self and of others, make responsible decisions, and manage one's own behaviors and those of others (Elias, et al., 1997). The SEL movement is based upon scientific research on 'emotional intelligence' by professors Peter Salovey and John Mayer. Emotional Intelligence is the mental ability to process and respond to emotions. Some examples of this would be recognizing emotional expressions, using emotions to enhance thinking and regulating emotions to drive effective behaviors (Mayer & Salovey, 1997; Salovey & Mayer, 1990). Mayer and Salovey theorized that the ability to carry out these processes is closely linked to social competence, adaptation, and academic success.

In recent years, much research has been done regarding various programs focused on social and emotional learning (SEL). One of these studies from 2011, concludes that formal steps taken to promote students' social and emotional development results in increased academic success, improved quality of relationships between teachers and students, and a decrease in problem behavior (Durlak, Weissberg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011).

The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), is a nonprofit entity that advocates and provides leadership for high quality SEL programming and learning standards. As described in Figure 1, CASEL identifies 5 major competencies associated with SEL: self-awareness, self management, social awareness, relationship management, and responsible decision making (Zins, Weissberg, Wang, & Walberg, 2004).

Figure 1. CASEL SEL Competencies



Self-awareness	Accurately assessing one's feelings, interests, values, and strengths; maintaining a well-grounded sense of self-confidence
Self-management	Regulating one's emotions to handle stress, control impulses, and persevere in overcoming obstacles; setting and monitoring progress toward personal and academic goals; expressing emotions appropriately
Social awareness	Taking the perspective of and empathizing with others; recognizing and appreciating individual and group similarities and differences; recognizing and using family, school, and community resources
Relationship management	Establishing and maintaining healthy and rewarding cooperative relationships; resisting inappropriate social pressure; preventing, managing, and resolving interpersonal conflict; seeking help when needed
Responsible decision making	Making decisions based on consideration of ethical standards, safety concerns, appropriate social norms, respect for others, and probable consequences of various actions; applying decision-making skills to academic and social situations; contributing to the well-being of one's school and community

General mindfulness practices outlines similar goals to that of Social Emotional Learning. "Both initiatives focus on the education of the whole child with emphasis on the

development of positive self, moral, social and emotional understanding.” (Schonert-Reichl, Roeser, & Maloney, 2016). Considering the Social Emotional Learning (SEL) theory has much study and evidence based research behind it, practicing mindfulness is a great strategy to deepen SEL goals of improving both students’ experience and performance. Mindfulness pioneer, Jon Kabat-Zinn defines the practice as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment. (Kabat-Zinn, 2006). Findings on how this practice can be implemented for the benefit of students in the classroom will be addressed in the the research portion of my paper.

BODY

What is Mindfulness?

In our day-to-day lives, we are usually caught up in distracting thoughts or in opinions about what is happening in the moment. This is mindlessness. Living this way often leads to emotional suffering. Emotional suffering is endemic to the human condition and comes in the form of stress, anxiety, depression, behavior problems, interpersonal conflict, confusion, despair (just to name a few). On the other end of the spectrum, mindfulness is an “attribute of consciousness long believed to promote well-being” (Brown & Ryan, 2003). The practice of mindfulness has a direct correlation in alleviating and directly combating emotional suffering. By focusing our attention on the task at hand, we are not entangled in the past or future, and we are not judging or rejecting what is occurring at the moment (Germer, 2004). We are present.

Brown and Ryan developed the The Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS), shown in Figure 2, to assess the core characteristic of mindfulness in an individual: “a receptive state of

mind in which attention, informed by a sensitive awareness of what is occurring in the present, simply observes what is taking place” (Brown & Ryan, 2003).

Figure 2. Brown & Ryan’s *Mindful Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS)*

Instructions: Below is a collection of statements about your everyday experience. Using the 1-6 scale below, please indicate how frequently or infrequently you currently have each experience. Please answer according to what really reflects your experience rather than what you think your experience should be. Please treat each item separately from every other item.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
	almost always	very frequently	somewhat frequently	somewhat infrequently	very infrequently	almost never
_____ 1.	I could be experiencing some emotion and not be conscious of it until some time later.					
_____ 2.	I break or spill things because of carelessness, not paying attention, or thinking of something else.					
_____ 3.	I find it difficult to stay focused on what’s happening in the present.					
_____ 4.	I tend to walk quickly to get where I’m going without paying attention to what I experience along the way.					
_____ 5.	I tend not to notice feelings of physical tension or discomfort until they really grab my attention.					
_____ 6.	I forget a person’s name almost as soon as I’ve been told it for the first time.					
_____ 7.	It seems I am “running on automatic,” without much awareness of what I’m doing.					
_____ 8.	I rush through activities without being really attentive to them.					
_____ 9.	I get so focused on the goal I want to achieve that I lose touch with what I’m doing right now to get there.					
_____ 10.	I do jobs or tasks automatically, without being aware of what I’m doing.					
_____ 11.	I find myself listening to someone with one ear, doing something else at the same time.					
_____ 12.	I drive places on ‘automatic pilot’ and then wonder why I went there.					
_____ 13.	I find myself preoccupied with the future or the past.					
_____ 14.	I find myself doing things without paying attention.					
_____ 15.	I snack without being aware that I’m eating.					

Scoring: To score the scale, simply compute a mean (average) of the 15 items.

Benefits of Mindfulness in Adolescents

Adolescence is a developmental period in which transformative biological, social, and psychological changes take place. As mentioned earlier, the amount of self-reported stress during this period is on the rise mirroring that of adults. Mindfulness interventions are increasingly

being implemented in high schools to “improve students’ stress management and psychosocial outcomes” (Milligan, et al., 2016). While these interventions are widely used by licensed therapists and psychologists, the practice of mindfulness has been adapted for easy application by any individual for themselves and, more importantly for this example, teachers for their students.

After investigating many mindfulness integration studies conducted on man school campuses and classrooms, across various demographics. The preliminary results of each study were similar across the board. One study of which took place over a three month period, on 6 different high school campuses. The students were subject to a variety of regularly scheduled mindful practices, including meditation and yoga, of which the intensity increased over the period of study. At the conclusion of the study, students were asked to evaluate their experience. Responses indicated that students generally had a positive experience in the program and felt they learned skills that helped them in their day-to-day lives:

“The program has helped me because now I know different routines and exercises that I can do at home that helps me lower and reduce my stress. So whenever I get stressed out I can just do a pose and sometimes I can show my mother and my family.”

--11th grade girl

“The most important thing I learned in the program was all the different ways to deal with your stress like instead of like fighting and stuff.” --10th grade boy

“It helps you relieve stress when you really feel stressed out or you’re really mad and focus on what’s inside of you and just make sure that you stay calm.” --9th grade girl

The same study conducted teacher focus groups to explore whether they felt students benefited from the program and whether program implementation had been organized effectively. Across the board, teachers were supportive of the idea of implementing yoga and mindfulness-based techniques in a school setting. As noted by several teachers, there was noticeable improvements in their students awareness and attention and gave them a significant advantage in capturing the interest of their students who historically struggled with behavioral problems, high activity level, and poor attentional focus. “Some teachers noted that they had observed improvements in their students; other teachers were not sure whether their students had shown changes, and one teacher did not believe she had seen changes” (Mendelson, et al., 2010). Teachers expressed interest in knowing more about the intervention curriculum so that they could reinforce the skills students learned.

Ruth Baer defines mindfulness as “the non-judgmental observation of the ongoing stream of internal and external stimuli as they arise” (Baer, 2003). Non-judgment fosters mindfulness when we are dealing with difficult physical or emotional states. Fostering non-judgement in our

own personal selves will, in turn, translate to non judgement of others. This is a crucial aspect of mindfulness from an educator perspective considering the ever-present issue of bullying - bullying on an off campus, cyberbullying and bullying past adolescence into adulthood. The causes, psychology, evolution, solutions, etc. behind bullying has been is the topic of endless discussions, studies, theories and the like. Unfortunately, we have yet to find a solution.

While mindfulness and its positive effects on bullying could and should be the topic of its own paper, here is the essence: Many behavioral studies have shown a strong relationship between self-esteem and bullying, to combat this, parents and teachers are urged to prevent and reduce feelings of poor self-worth among children and adolescents. Beginning with the SELF, as practiced in mindfulness, teaches does just that - students learn to be non-judgemental of themselves which improves self-acceptance and confidence. We as educators can foster acceptance in the classroom through mindfulness and give our students the tools to carry it with them outside of the classroom and as they become active members of society.

Integrating Mindfulness in the Classroom

One of the most widely understood method of practicing mindfulness is through meditation. Mediation strategies involve placing focus on breath and body awareness. Meditation in its most basic form can be practiced through a “mindful moment” or momentarily disengaging from our activities by taking a long, conscious breath. Even at the peak of our inevitably busy and distracting daily lives, the ability to take a mindful moment is an approachable introduction to mediation teachers can instill in their students.

There is a great range of levels and methods to introduce mindfulness in the classroom. For educators testing out mindfulness and maybe just beginning to learn themselves, there are very hands off strategies where you simply press play for a few minutes of voice-recorded guided meditation. As the educator learns and practices more, their approach can evolve to be more hands on.

Because mindfulness in education is by no means standardized, acquiring the knowledge and skills to being mindful as an educator at this point (naturally) begins with the SELF. Educators seeking the tools to integrate mindfulness in their classroom do so mostly through self-motivation and interrogation. There are endless textual resources, workshops and groups to get involved with if educators and administrators take the initiative. Many campuses and districts are taking steps in the right direction to educate their educators, develop programs and create wellness spaces.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

Mindfulness in its broadest sense is an “attribute of consciousness long believed to promote well-being” (Brown & Ryan, 2003). Developing this personal skill provides a human with the ability to combat the human condition of emotional suffering and put life into perspective. Practicing mindfulness as an adolescent helps improve a student's ability to manage stress and psychosocial outcomes (Milligan, et al., 2016). Because academic, emotional and social stresses are part of adolescence, these factors are not seen as direct need for psychological intervention. In turn, the vast majority of students with these issues do not seek help which is

why educators can take matters into their own hands by integrating mindfulness into their classrooms.

Studies show that practicing mindfulness in the classroom teaches students various routines and exercises they can practice individually to deal with and reduce their personal stress or even anger. From an educator's standpoint, the studies show teachers support for implementing various mindfulness programs on campus and their willingness to learn more about mindfulness for them personally and how they can integrate it in their classroom. Because of mindfulness' teaching of looking non-judgmentally at one's self, the practice in adolescent students could, in theory, translate externally to combat bullying.

Mindfulness can be integrated in the classroom through a wide range of disciplines and practices. For the novice educator, letting a voice-guided recording take the reigns is a great place to start. The practice of mindfulness in education is increasing across campuses and school districts and starts with an individual taking initiative to learn about and implement strategies in their own classroom. This can then grow to the campus, district and **crossing fingers, crossing fingers** state level.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the integration of mindfulness in the classroom as a Social Emotional Learning (SEL) strategy is boundless in its application and benefits. Social and emotional development in one's adolescent phase in life is integral to developing 'emotional intelligence'. Providing students with a time and place to practice mindfulness teaches them to look into their SELF, in turn, tapping in to their emotional intelligence. Teachers are with students in a

classroom setting five days a week. When given the proper tools, educators can take initial steps to combat emotional suffering in our adolescent students; most of whom do not identify the issue as serious enough to seek help from a specialist. Even if emotional suffering is not the issue, practicing mindfulness provides students with the ability to practice emotional self care and, in turn, caring for others. If this is all the student is left with, it is a beautiful building block to emotional intelligence and teaching our next generation to be accepting humans in our current harsh society.

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