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Mindfulness and Student Success

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Abstract

Mindfulness has long been practiced in Eastern spiritual traditions for personal improvement, and educators and educational institutions have recently begun to explore its usefulness in schools. Mindfulness training can be valuable for helping students be more successful learners and more connected members of an educational community. To determine if mindfulness instruction should be incorporated into curriculum at all levels of formal education to help students be more successful in their academic pursuits, a thorough review of research was conducted using primary and secondary sources of the possible applications and results of mindfulness in education. Mindfulness education was helpful in some specific ways: minimizing the impact of bullying, helping students with learning disabilities, benefiting students who are training in careers with high emotion and stress, and coaching. Based on the results, students who have mindfulness incorporated in their curriculum could potentially reap benefits academically and personally.

The Oxford dictionary (2014) defines mindfulness as “a mental state achieved by focusing one’s awareness on the present moment while calmly acknowledging and accepting one’s feelings, thoughts, and bodily sensations”. Mindfulness often refers to specific practices used to focus a person’s attention – meditation, yoga, breathing, single-pointed concentration on an object – and is characterized by intentionality and nonjudgmental observation of experience (Broderick & Jennings, 2012). Mindfulness is often associated with Eastern spirituality, but mindfulness’ purely secular applications have been increasingly explored in settings as varied as the workplace, correctional facilities, and educational institutions.

Formal education can be challenging and stressful for all students. Students at every level – elementary school, middle school, high school, undergraduate universities and colleges, and graduate and professional studies – face similar challenges to learning and being a part of an institution of learning. While educational

institutions can be settings where wondrous learning and growth can occur, they can also play host to negative internal states such as anxiety, isolation, and depression that may not only decrease a person’s learning experience but may also lead to behaviors like violence and bullying. Educators must focus on academic outcomes and classroom material but can also promote new non-academic curriculum to create a better learning environment. Mindfulness training can be valuable for helping students be more successful learners and more connected members of an educational community. Should mindfulness instruction be incorporated into curriculum at all levels of formal education to help students be more successful in their academic pursuits?

Methods

A thorough search was made of primary and secondary sources related to mindfulness and education. The author utilized the Academic Search

Premier database through Colorado State University Libraries. Search terms included the following terms and combination of terms:

- Mindfulness
- Mindfulness + education
- Mindfulness + learning
- Mindfulness + school
- Mindfulness + learning disabilities
- Mindfulness + ADHD

General internet searches were used to find statistics and data to frame topics and show relevance to educators.

Findings

The literature review yielded interesting results on the connection between mindfulness and student success. Some research focuses on mindfulness' effects on particular attributes that affect student success including general learning skills that affect academic performance, critical thinking skills, behavior and self-control, and job-specific skills developed in some graduate and professional degree programs. Mindfulness has been studied as a method to alleviate the negative effects of bullying in schools. Some research focuses on how mindfulness can be used to help students with learning disabilities. Mindfulness training for coaches of student athletes has also been explored. A summary of these findings is included below and categorized based on the specific application or population of students.

Learning Skills and Academic Performance

Starting at the earliest levels of education, students are taught the importance of specific skills that affect their ability to learn in the classroom and after school while doing their homework. At the very heart of mindfulness is focus, and focus is crucial to academic success. Like most skills, maintaining focus improves with practice, and students trained in mindfulness can better focus on

the task or lesson at hand and filter out distractions (Rodgers, 2014).

Mindfulness is helpful in the moment of learning and also in more future-focused skills. By maintaining a calmer view of the present, students are able to improve their study habits, planning, and organizational skills through mindfulness (Broderick & Jennings, 2012).

Even for the best students, being tested is stressful. A student may have carefully read every word of text, paid close attention throughout lectures and taken detailed notes, and spent hours reviewing the materials in advance of an exam. When the test arrives, students may feel so overwhelmed, scattered, and tired that their performance does not match the effort they put forth. "Test anxiety" is a catchall term often used to describe this phenomenon. Mindfulness training enhances memory and concentration while reducing mind-wandering or daydreaming, specific skills that can improve a student's ability to test well (Docksai, 2013). These improvements are not necessarily limited to a student's performance on "regular" classroom tests: a study conducted at the University of California at Santa Barbara found that mindfulness instruction helped students increase their scores on the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) by 16 % (Docksai, 2013). As standardized test scores factor in heavily in university applications, mindfulness instruction may not only help a person in their day-to-day life as a student but also influence their options for admission and affect the availability of financial aid.

Critical Thinking Skills

Our formal educational system purports to teach students critical thinking skills, but some educators question how well these skills are actually developed in the classroom. Most traditional educational institutions are based on competition – who can score the highest on the exam, who develops the most innovative research, and who makes the most compelling argument in support of the ideas they are advancing – and competition is inherently based on external reference to others. In contrast, critical thinking is internally referential, and mindfulness teaches students to look inwardly, question their views and beliefs, recognize the

wisdom they have within themselves, and think more critically (Burke & Hawkins, 2012).

Behavior and Self-control

Early in their educational careers, students learn that success in school involves more than good study habits, test preparation, and reading comprehension. At some of the earliest grades, teachers spend a great deal of time helping students develop their abilities to be good classmates and positive members of the school community. Self-awareness is one key to good behavior in the classroom, allowing students to understand the emotions they are experiencing and ideally harness the ways in which they react to these emotions. Mindfulness helps students improve their self-awareness, identify their feelings, and control their reactions. Students who can process their feelings positively tend to behave better in class, take turns, play fair, and share (Rodgers, 2014).

Self-control has obvious benefits for students in the classroom, at school, and beyond, and mindfulness can play an important role in learning and strengthening impulse control.

Negative behaviors that do not fit well into a school environment sometimes become automatic responses to emotional distress – a person who feels threatened may react with anger, for example – and, like any learned behavior, may be difficult to unlearn. Mindfulness can help students learn new, healthier responses deeply enough that they rewire their automatic impulse systems; with practice, students learn to increase the time between impulse and action and learn healthier problem solving skills and behaviors in reactions to emotional distress (Broderick & Jennings, 2012). When students pause and reflect on their thoughts and emotions, they are more likely to consider their options and are more likely to discuss problems than react physically (Rodgers, 2014).

Job-Specific Skill Development

To excel in certain professions, specific skills help practitioners perform well in their field, and formal education can help students develop myriad skills to become their best in their chosen profession. Research has shown that mindfulness education can be particularly helpful in social work education programs. In their graduate studies,

social work students learn to develop their empathy with skills like seeing issues from their clients' perspectives and showing appropriate concern while also withholding judgment, and social work students trained in mindfulness are shown to demonstrate better empathic and nonjudgmental responses to their clients (Grant, 2014). Listening skills are also crucial for social workers to excel at their jobs – social work graduate programs focus on listening actively, listening accurately, and listening for meaning – and mindfulness exercises improve social work students' ability to develop these habits while minimizing poor listening habits like mind-wandering, thinking ahead, and multitasking while listening (Goh, 2012). Social work students are faced with difficult situations in their practicums and internships, and stress, emotional exhaustion, and vicarious trauma are commonly reported side effects; these effects have been shown to be more pronounced for students during their education than in their subsequent careers, and students commonly report experiencing “burnout” before they ever embark on their careers (Napoli & Bonifas, 2011). When social work program faculty have implemented mindfulness techniques to help students cope with the impact of these negative effects, students have reported better experiences in their academic programs and have reported fewer adverse effects from vicarious trauma (Napoli et al., 2011).

Medical school students are another population who benefit from learning to make meaningful connections with their clients. While not all medical schools focus on this aspect of practicing medicine – faculty already have so much to cover in the realm of technical expertise, and students spend a great deal of their time in rotations through various medical specialties – patients consider physicians with a good bedside manner to be more skilled and are more likely to recommend them to other patients (Bond, Mason, Lemaster, Shaw, Mullin, Holick, & Saper, 2013). Much like social workers, doctors are encouraged to be empathetic, compassionate, and connected to their clients. Like social work students, medical students are prone to burnout because of the rigor of their academic programs, and medical students can be fiercely competitive amongst themselves as the top rotations

can go to the highest ranked students. As an element of burnout, students report feeling less empathetic toward their patients as they progress through medical school (Burks & Kobus, 2012). Some medical programs have begun to incorporate mindfulness training for their students with promising results: students who participated in mindfulness training reported feeling higher levels of empathy and compassion for and connection to their patients than those who did not undergo similar training, they reported lower levels of stress in their academic programs, and they reported a greater feeling of community with their fellow students in a highly competitive environment (Burks et al., 2012; Bond et al., 2013).

Impact on Bullying in Schools

School bullying has increasingly gained attention in the United States in recent years, particularly as the media has covered a number of high profile cases of suicide that resulted from bullying. According to United States Department of Health & Human Services statistics, more than 70% of students and an equal percentage of educational staff have witnessed bullying at schools (2013). Bullying can take a variety of forms, including verbal, social, physical, and cyberbullying. While the term bullying once conjured up images of elementary school children having their lunch money stolen by the larger child from an older class, the statistics show the truth to be considerably different: almost one-third of middle school and high school students reported being bullied (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2013), and more than one-fifth of undergraduate students have reported being the victims of bullying (Alberti Center for Bullying Abuse Prevention, 2013).

Mindfulness has been found to be an effective means to address bullying in schools. Accomsett Middle School in Smithtown, New York, initiated a mindfulness program for students and staff and found it had a considerable impact on bullying. After starting a character-building program that included teachings in mindful attention, the school found that bullying was reduced by improving students' behavior and self-regulation, reducing peer-to-peer conflict, and nurturing positive social

skills including compassion, patience, empathy, and generosity (Nocero & Beckerman, 2014). Bullying is not always reported because of fear of retaliation, and the middle school found mindfulness skills increased the likelihood that students who were victims of and witnesses to bullying would speak up and report incidents to school staff (Nocero et al., 2014).

Applications for Students with Learning Disabilities

The United States Centers for Disease Control reports that 14.7% of school-aged children are diagnosed with autism spectrum disorder (2014) and 11% are diagnosed with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder or ADHD (2013). Students with learning disabilities can have considerable obstacles in educational settings. Not only can their disabilities pose challenges to learning, but their disabilities can also make it more difficult to behave according to the conventional standards of a school. Research has shown that mindfulness can have a positive impact on students with learning disabilities. Symptoms of ADHD like frequent mind-wandering and difficulty concentrating can create obvious academic problems for students in the classroom and as they work on their studies at home. Educators who have implemented mindfulness training for students with ADHD have seen academic improvement as well as a decrease in behavioral issues arising from impulsiveness and difficulty reading social cues (Docksai, 2013). Other research has shown instruction in mindfulness benefits individuals who fall along the autism spectrum: incidents of challenging, disruptive, and overly physical behavior were reduced as individuals learned to better control their reactions to stressful situations (Thomas, 2013).

Athletics and Coaching

Athletics are an integral part of the school experience for many students. According to the annual High School Athletics Participation Survey conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations, more than half of high school students in the United States participate in school-sponsored athletics (2011). In addition to its application in academic setting, mindfulness

training has been shown to help coaches more effectively connect with and motivate athletes. Several coaching models developed around mindfulness incorporate techniques to help coaches focus more fully on their athletes, recognize their own internal states, and not get caught up in the emotions of the game, and evidence supports that these models are effective in optimizing performance (Davis, 2012).

Discussion

Because mindfulness does seem to have a relevant and potentially important role in education, mindfulness instruction probably should be incorporated into curriculum at all levels of education to help students be more successful. Mindfulness education appears to have a positive impact on academic performance by helping students – even those with learning disabilities – focus, be more organized, plan ahead, perform better on exams, and think critically. Students trained in mindfulness are more likely to behave according to a school's standards; schools have even seen dramatic behavior problems like bullying decrease with the implementation of mindfulness instruction. Students in people-centered, emotionally-taxing programs of study like medicine and social work are better able to serve their clients and take care of themselves when mindfulness is incorporated into their curriculum. Research on mindfulness in education shows its usefulness at all ages and grade levels, from elementary school to middle school to high school to undergraduate studies to graduate and professional degree programs. In an era of dwindling funding for schools, introducing new curriculum is seldom an easy undertaking; however, mindfulness training can be free or at least inexpensive, and it can be incorporated into existing classes or established as stand-alone classes. The benefits of mindfulness can be realized in the other aspects of students' lives with improved skills in focus, problem-solving, impulse control, relationship-building, and stress reduction.

More research in mindfulness would be useful to guide the discussion about how it can be implemented with the greatest impact on students. Research could focus on the various approaches to

mindfulness (meditation, yoga, etc.) to determine which are most effective and may find that different groups benefit more from one approach versus another. Other academic and professional programs that train students in careers involving high interpersonal interaction and stress could apply the lessons learned from social work and medical students; teachers, nurses, attorneys, law enforcement professionals, and those working in business management could begin their careers better equipped to handle difficult situations and maintain a healthy emotional outlook as a complement to the technical skills formal education provides. Coaches of team sports could use mindfulness to help teammates work together more collaboratively instead of competing amongst themselves. In summary, mindfulness may be an effective tool to mold students into better learners and educational institutions into better learning communities.

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