

Mindfulness in Academia: Considerations for Administrative Preparation

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This conceptual paper presents a synthesis of information about the workload stress of educational administrators. Currently, there are few programs designed to assist educational leaders to deal with stress (Hawk & Martin, 2011). Stress reduction programs may include mindfulness, a widely used practice of meditation. Mindfulness is used in formal medical and health care settings, and is gaining interest across disciplines of law and business (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) and has been proven by numerous scientific studies to promote health and reduce stress (Greeson, 2009). In addition to suggesting that meditation be part of the university preparation program for administrative training, this paper presents new thinking by suggesting that the attitudinal foundation of mindfulness practice be embedded within course content for reflective, authentic, and case study assignments.

Introduction

Kabat-Zinn (2005) related a story of a group of business people who came to a workshop on mindfulness practice. As he entered the room he noticed the people doing the usual pre-workshop things such as reading the *Wall Street Journal*, and checking their personal devices of texts, phones, etc. When he suggested that the group begin without an agenda, sitting in stillness for a while, several men and women began to weep within minutes. After several minutes, Kabat-Zinn asked if anyone would like to share what was happening with the tears, and there were almost unanimous comments where people revealed they almost never do anything without an agenda. Men and women, the executives of major corporations, in touch with the stress and burnout of their fast-paced worlds, were experiencing stillness and weeping for what they almost never experience—peace, quiet, and no agenda.

Consider the following description of burnout syndrome: “losing enthusiasm for work (emotional exhaustion), treating people as if they were objects (depersonalization), and having a sense that work is no longer meaningful (low personal accomplishment)” (Krasner, Epstein, Beckman, Suchman, Chapman, et al., 2009, p. 1385). What was the occupation being referenced in this description? Physicians, were the members of the group being characterized with burnout, with the statistic that one in three was found to be experiencing burnout at any given time in their career.

What about aspiring and practicing administrators and their stress levels? I write this paper to include a view of the world of educational leaders, the high price of stress, and the options that we have, as university professors, to provide stress reduction for them within the confines of a university preparation program for leadership. I write with equal parts of optimism and urgency, forging perhaps a new path for thinking that there is something we can do to instill hope along with skills in learning how to have a balance of mindfulness meditation for the leaders of our nation's schools.

Background

It has long been recognized that principals are involved with expectations that make their jobs ones that are full of interactions that are fragmented, brief, and unrelenting (Hallinger, 1992). Principals are under continual pressure and enormous stress as they respond to demands for quality while working with demographic changes, increased parental expectations, curricular mandates, technological advances, and instructional improvements (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cooley & Shen, 2003; Griffith, 1999; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Petzko, 2008). Hawk and Martin (2011) reported high levels of stress for over 50 per cent of superintendents. Next to diminished revenues, principals reported personal stress was listed as the highest stress factor, receiving higher mean scores than for other issues such as diminished test scores (Wells, Maxfield, & Klocko, 2011). The American Institute of Stress (2001) indicated that two of the ten jobs that are considered to be most stressful are inner-city schoolteachers and school administrators.

What are some of the effects of that level of stress? While stress level components are so widely reported that most people can relate to and report them, medical and scientific papers describe the deleterious effects. Sorenson (2007) indicated that stress creates myriad issues that range from absenteeism, low productivity, employee attrition, and related health issues. Educational leaders must simultaneously deal with the effects of their own stress levels while responding to and providing leadership for those in the schools, both teachers and students. Meanwhile, professionals are looking for relief from stress while they report to work, often facing stress in both their personal and professional lives (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). The practice of meditation or mindfulness is a means of stress reduction.

Interest in mindfulness continues to gain momentum. In 2007 there were over 70 scientific papers published on the therapeutic uses of mindfulness (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008). Kabat-Zinn (2005) reported, "Mindfulness meditation has come to be taught in law firms and is currently offered to law students at Yale, Columbia, Harvard, and Missouri" (p. 35). Currently, there is little in the literature to link the practice of mindfulness with academia.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness, while widely practiced throughout the world, and known about in medical centers, is less well-known in educational communities. Ludwig and Kabat-Zinn (2008) reported, "Pain, stress, coping, and quality of life comprise the original focus of medical research into mindfulness" (p. 1350). Kabat-Zinn (2003) offered this definition, "An operational working definition of mindfulness is: the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment" (p. 145). Mindfulness meditation is referred to as a way of

being as opposed to way of *doing*, a way of non-striving, perhaps not a familiar concept with the fast-paced and frenetic world of administrators. It is because of the practice of stillness and reflection that mindfulness practice is a viable option for stress reduction.

The essential elements of stress reduction can be integrated with educational leadership preparation to teach aspiring and practicing administrators effective coping mechanisms for dealing more effectively with their world of stress. Stress reduction has been the core of the program called mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) that was initiated by Jon Kabat-Zinn at the University of Massachusetts General Hospital in 1979 (Shapiro & Carlson, 2009). The MBSR program was originally offered for medical patients who were not successfully treated in the hospital setting, people with pain, incurable conditions, and those for whom traditional medical treatments failed to help. This program allowed doctors to send their patients who had the most challenging cases for an eight-week program where they learned how to become still and meditate on their breathing. Since that time, over 18,000 people have come to the clinic, from all parts of the world to participate in the one-day per week, with one full day retreat where MBSR teachers teach meditation techniques, and hatha yoga. The success of this approach is understood by this quote from Kabat-Zinn (2003), “Mindfulness-based programs are now offered in hospital and clinics around the world, as well as in schools, workplaces, corporate offices, law schools, adult and juvenile prisons, inner city health centers, and a range of other settings” (p. 144). The MBSR techniques have been used successfully with people experiencing chronic pain, anxiety, depression, physical, or psychological problems, with reports of significant improvement (Germer, 2009; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009).

Scientific papers are relating numerous benefits of mindfulness training. Holzel, Carmody, Vangel, Congleton, Yerrametti, et al. (2011) reported, “Mindfulness meditation has been reported to produce positive effects on psychological well-being that extend beyond the time the individual is formally meditating” (p. 36). Baime (2011) suggested that scientific research is revealing how mindfulness practice can change the density in regions of the brain that are “...essential for attention, learning, and the regulation of emotion” (p. 46). Other reports point to the reduction of stress, anxiety, and depression, as well as increased immune response from regular mindfulness meditation practice (Carmody & Baer, 2007; Greeson, 2009). Dan Siegel (2010) argued, “Being fully present through mindful awareness training has been demonstrated to be a crucial factor in giving us resilience to face challenges that arise in our daily lives” (p. 1). Psychological and emotional benefits of mindfulness have included the ability to regulate emotion, reduce the negative patterns of thinking, and to improve patterns of thinking (Siegel, 2007).

Mindful Practice

Mindful practice has been described as a simple practice that is not easy (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, 2005; Smalley & Winston, 2010). Simple, because mindfulness devotes practice to a focus on the breath, as it enters and leaves the body; and, challenging because that it inherently almost impossible to do with the racing of the mind, and continual bombardment of thoughts. The term practice is deliberate, with therapists and mindfulness leaders describing the importance of the regular practice of meditation (Germer, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Kornfield, 2009; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009; Siegel, D., 2010; Siegel, R., 2010; Smalley & Winston, 2010). Shapiro and Carlson (2009) related the three elements of mindful practice as “intention,

attention, and attitude” (pp. 8-10). Meditation involves intentionally paying attention to the present moment, cultivating an attitude that includes non-judgment and patience. Greeson (2009) referred to four elements of mindfulness as being able to pay attention on purpose; recognize and correctly label emotions; develop more effective self-awareness; and the cultivation of nonreactivity where one may observe events without having to act on them. Mindfulness practice helps with the cultivation of being present for the moment, or *presence* (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers, 2004). Kabat-Zinn (2009) related the attitudes and commitment that are the foundation of mindfulness practice: nonjudging; patience; beginner’s mind; trust; non-striving; acceptance; and letting go.

Mindfulness practice involves the intentional practice of meditation, where the focus is often on the breath. Other forms of meditation involve focus on the mind/thoughts, sounds, *choiceless* awareness where there is an absence of focus on a particular concept or sense, mindfulness walking, or body scan—a progressive and systematic awareness of parts of the body. Meditations can be guided with voice instructions, or without direction, where people practice in silence. Mindfulness meditation can be practiced in sitting, lying, or walking positions (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). Sitting positions can be practiced on cushions, the floor, chair, or other surfaces.

Mindfulness and the Possibilities for Administrative Practice

Traditional university preparation programs in educational leadership do not include introductions to mindfulness practice. Classic administrative textbooks describe the world of work of administrators, the busy and important roles they play, and may include references to conflict resolution or the role of wellness in the workplace, particularly in textbooks for human resource management. Unfortunately, I found no references in the literature to relate mindfulness as part of the stress reduction techniques for educational leaders.

How would administrative preparation programs help give aspiring and practicing educational leaders the skills to navigate their stressful world? First, university professors would need to be conversant with the stress that administrators face on a daily basis; they would need to open up dialogue where educational leaders’ concerns can be heard, and to offer skill building exercises that allow administrators to experience mindfulness meditation as well as learn about the conceptual and theoretical components of the same. Because there is an experiential as well as conceptual side of mindfulness, it would be essential for professors to either be involved with practice or introduce guests to their classrooms who can speak with the credibility of practice. Guests to the classrooms could provide this authentic experience for students. The teachers involved in the MBSR programs practice meditation along with the patients in the programs.

One of the most proven methods of stress reduction indicated in the literature is meditation (Greeson, 2009), a practice that could benefit aspiring and practicing administrators. Meditation is something that needs to be guided and supported. How would this happen in a classroom? I have been teaching the principles of mindfulness in several of my educational leadership courses at the university level for the past four years. I also make presentations to doctoral candidates about stress reduction through mindfulness meditation; these students practice meditation in a group setting. I learned from my students that I do not have to waste their time by telling them about stress and the impact of stress. They know it already. They can tell me. What they do not know, however, is how to release it. In the days

of relentless agendas, they receive texts, phone calls, and emails while in class. Their connectivity is constant, and while students used to talk about multi-tasking with some sense of pride, I now hear descriptions of how the multi-tasking is draining them of all their energy. So, in my classes, and for these students, we learn how to experience stillness, and we do a guided meditation of a breathing meditation. Some students have cried at the experience, others fall asleep, and others are not sure of the benefit because they could not quiet their mind. I usually hear things like, “We should have known this before,” or “We should be learning this in our classes.”

In my classes, I have introduced the concept of mindfulness as we talk about the stress of leadership. In this domain, we review concepts such as verbal aikido, conflict resolution, peaceful dialogue, and emotional intelligence skill building. After building trust and a sense of emotional safety for all students, I ask them if they would like to try a brief meditation. We typically try a 5-minute meditation of the breath, and afterward people either debrief about that experience or what they would need to do to include meditation in their world on a regular basis. For one of my courses in Human Resource Management, I have an assignment for the topic of conflict resolution and wellness. Students may cultivate a personal action plan where they design a stress reduction practice schedule, and then report on the scientific basis for that plan, and their perceptions for implementing that plan. Many of the students choose to practice meditation or Hatha yoga, a type of gentle stretches that cultivate mindfulness, for that assignment. Students may learn this type of yoga from an inexpensive tape that can be ordered online. The students in my Teacher Leadership courses have also described their relief in learning about meditation for stress reduction. My next course of action to build upon the foundation of mindfulness practice will be in the integration of the concepts of mindfulness with various assignments and class discussions. It is my belief that these practices will strengthen the students’ sense of moment-to-moment awareness and its relation to stress reduction.

Course-embedded Mindfulness Practice

While mindfulness meditation is the first goal of stress reduction, I present in this paper a new approach that embeds the seven attitudinal foundations of mindfulness practice (Kabat-Zinn, 2009) with suggestions as to how they might be integrated in the course assignments for a university administrative preparation program. The seven attitudinal foundations are listed below:

1. **Non-judging-** Mindfulness is cultivated by assuming the stance of an impartial witness to your own experience. To do this requires that you become aware of the constant stream of judging and reacting to inner and outer experiences that we are all normally caught up in, and learn to step back from it. (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 33)

Case studies can be a perfect vehicle for reflecting about the myriad situations that involve administrators, allowing for them to begin a process of objectively reviewing what happened, and how things could have been different if they would have been an impartial witness of that experience. The goal here is not to be without an opinion, but to cultivate a stance of distance where people learn the skill of suspending judgment, while becoming aware of what has occurred, important skills for educational leaders. From the case studies, graduate students can

share personal stories where they reflect about their own ‘case studies,’ reflecting as to how they might develop a stance of distance where they practice awareness.

2. **Patience-** Patience is a form of wisdom. It demonstrates that we understand and accept the fact that sometimes things must unfold in their own time. Much of the time our thoughts overwhelm our perception of the present moment. (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, pp. 34-35)

Patience is an important attribute of mindfulness. Unfortunately, many administrators feel the push to multi-task and rush from one encounter to another (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003). Administrators face the aspect of instant and continuous communication, with what is known as *24/7 connectivity*, sources of pressure that create feelings of never getting away from work. Kabat-Zinn (2005) revealed the importance of a “counterbalance” to the stress by bringing mindfulness into our world, a practice that takes patience (p.155). Case studies and authentic assignments where aspiring and practicing administrators can methodically analyze the culture, structure, history, and happenings in a school system, can slow down the process of instant solutions, ones where reflective dialogue and analyses are shared to cultivate the awareness of patience. Role-playing exercises where students interact in conversations are also helpful; these students can engage in conversations that they often encounter, taking the time to analyze when and where these conversations may erupt in anger. By practicing moment-to-moment awareness and patience, aspiring and practicing administrators can learn skills important to their stress reduction and professional effectiveness.

3. **Beginner’s Mind-** To see the richness of the present moment, we need to cultivate what has been called ‘beginner’s mind,’ a mind that is willing to see everything as if for the first time. An open, ‘beginner’s’ mind allows us to be receptive to new possibilities and prevents us from getting stuck in the rut of our own expertise, which often thinks it knows more than it does. (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 35)

The concept of a beginner’s mind might seem paradoxical since administrators work to develop experience and expertise in their various roles; however, the cultivation of the beginner’s mind allows administrators to strive to see what is happening without preconceived ideas, or the history of strained relationships, frustrations, and negative energy. Likewise, positive relationships, and history can also impede the development of new thought or possibilities. Our own experience provides a lens through which we see the world; moment-to-moment awareness allows for a fresh perspective that creates new insights and opportunities. Aspiring and practicing administrators can reflect upon a culture triage of their schools, where they write new scenarios that offer alternate translations of that history. Students can also practice dialogue where they reveal something that happened to them, from their point of view, and then offer a new, and fresh perspective of what occurred from the other person’s point of view in their scenario. By doing this, people begin to experience how their worldviews are often perceived differently by others, and that multiple perspectives are important considerations for sustaining peace.

4. **Trust-** Developing a basic trust in yourself and your feelings is an integral part of meditation training. It is impossible to become like somebody else. Your only hope

is to become more fully yourself. That is the reason for practicing meditation in the first place. (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 36)

University administrative preparation programs help to cultivate leaders who are capable and resourceful, able to provide leadership and direction for our nation's schools. A goal of these preparation programs is develop confidence in the leaders who will be cultivating leadership skills in the members of their schools. Trust is a cornerstone of the relationships that build growth in self and others. As administrators encounter challenging and stressful situations, trust in their own ability to resolve situations is an important belief. Meditation teaches people to develop belief in their innate wisdom and intuitive feelings (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). University administrative preparation programs can include reflective activities that ask aspiring and practicing administrators to write reflective essays with titles such as *This I Believe* in which they list the guiding principles and beliefs that are foundational to their success as leaders. The coursework can also require that these leaders create programs that cultivate relational trust among various groups within the school, a place where conflict can derail progress with forward growth. Activities in gaining trust include completing a culture triage where administrators learn about ways that people respond to each other in the school after systematically evaluating the existing culture; the administrators can develop plans to address some of the concerns that people have within the school, taking special care to work on the factors that unite people. Likewise, assignments that require ethical responses to workplace situations can build a sense of trust in the ability of administrators to respond with advocacy for students and their sense of achievement.

5. **Non-striving-** In the meditative domain, the best way to achieve your goals is to back off from striving for results and instead to start focusing carefully on seeing and accepting things as they are, moment by moment. With patience and regular practice, movement toward your goals will take place by itself. (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 38)

The issue of non-striving seems paradoxical to the role of administrators; leaders set the stage for growth and change, inspiring transformation within the school or school district. How could non-striving prove to be a positive direction for an administrator, given the role of growth, change, and transition that is part of that person's responsibility? There are several aspects to non-striving that resonate for administrators. First, is the adage, "go slow to go fast" in which slow movement is often preferred to a sudden movement in change. Additionally, if administrators allow themselves to be non-striving, they are present for the leadership of others. Non-striving does not equate with *no action*, instead, it implies paying attention to what is happening. How many times is there a rush to judgment in which an administrator rushes in to fix the situation, creating mandates or solving a situation, without the involvement of the people in the school or school district who are also connected? Non-striving is an action that takes incredible strength, instead of the reverse. Course assignments of non-striving might include a review of any aspect of leadership in a school, such as professional development, curriculum development, or peer evaluations. Aspiring and practicing leaders can analyze how the usual course of action could be changed if the administrators practiced nonstriving, allowing for the shared leadership of a building. They could also review a recent activity that they conducted, reviewing how they could have practiced non-striving at various stages, and

what insights they might have received with this different approach. Finally, they could list a variety of possibilities or activities where non-striving would benefit them professionally, or the school or school district.

6. **Acceptance-** Acceptance means seeing things as they are in the present. Often acceptance is only reached after we have gone through very emotion-filled periods of denial and then anger. Acceptance does not mean that you have to like everything or that you have to take a passive attitude toward everything and abandon your principles and values. It does not mean that you are satisfied with things as they are or that you are resigned to tolerating things as the 'have to be.' (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, pp. 38-39)

Acceptance is another emotion that can bring relief of stress to an administrator. The issue of acceptance means that administrators are aware of each moment as it comes, and receptive to the range of emotions that accompany actions (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). Administrators can respond, after carefully accepting what is in that moment, without forcing another outcome, or being resistant to what is being expressed. Within the range of human emotions, it is easy to vilify what we do not want to see expressed when it is discordant with our views; likewise, it is easy to over-listen to that which we agree and under-listen to all of which we do not agree. Acceptance teaches aspiring and practicing administrators to take each moment as it comes, and being fully with that moment, whether it is positive or negative. Listening is improved when one is fully present. The university preparation program can ask aspiring and practicing administrators to record issues that have emerged in their buildings, analyzing how they either accepted or rejected the information of that moment. Then, the students could create alternate scenarios for responses to situations that demonstrate what might occur if the person were acting in the moment, as opposed to acting out of denial or anger. Administrators can also practice being in the moment with acceptance as they respond to a variety of stressful situations, such as parent complaints, conflict with teachers, student problems, etc. The classroom can be a place where the students receive feedback from each other as they practice these various responses.

7. **Letting go-** In meditation practice we intentionally put aside the tendency to elevate some aspects of our experience and to reject others. Letting go is a way of letting things be, of accepting things as they are. When we find ourselves judging our experience, we let go of those judging thoughts. Similarly when thoughts of the past or of the future come up, we let go of them. We just watch. (Kabat-Zinn, 2009, p. 40)

Once again, it seems paradoxical to think that administrators would be engaged in the process of 'letting go.' After all, administrators are typically the take-charge people, responding to almost everything that surfaces in a school. The issue of letting go is not a response of *no action*; instead, it is a symbol of non-attachment, where being in the present moment means that administrators accept what is occurring in that moment, letting go of thoughts of judgment. In stressful situations people can hold on to the thoughts that bother them most; the practice of letting go allows them to be free of those thoughts. University coursework can include various options that let students experience the freedom of letting go. For example,

professors can include case studies or scenarios in which aspiring and practicing administrators analyze the stressors of authentic school situations and the likely, resulting emotional response that would be felt. From there, the administrators could re-write optional responses, discussing what it would be like to practice letting go of the predominant judgments of the moment. The students could also review some of the stress that they often feel in their work environment, re-writing their usual responses to be ones that let go of those judgments. With practice, and goal setting, the students could analyze the culture of their schools, and develop plans that allow them to stand back and let go of the most of their stressful feelings.

Discussion

Scientific studies inform us that mindfulness meditation can change the density of the brain, result in stress reduction, lowered blood pressure, lessened anxiety, depression, and pain response (Baime, 2011; Carmody & Baer, 2007; Greeson, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008; Siegel, 2007, 2010; Shapiro & Carlson, 2009; Smalley & Winston, 2010). Studies of educational leaders inform us of the world of stress in which leaders operate (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003; Cooley & Shen, 2003; Griffith, 1999; Marks & Printy, 2003; Pounder & Merrill, 2001; Petzko, 2008; Sorenson, 2007; Wells, Maxfield, & Klocko, 2011). University professors can offer programs that begin to address the coping mechanisms and stress levels of the aspiring and practicing administrators in their classes. Like mindfulness meditation, the concept is simple, but not easy (Kabat-Zinn, 2005). It is easy to understand why stress reduction is needed, but difficult to operationalize without professors who can offer the training in their classes, either with their personal involvement or outside resources. We bring in various practitioners and guests to share expertise for a variety of topics; we can do the same with mindfulness practice.

The lines of inquiry concerning stress, integrated with plans that reduce that stress are long overdue. *Knowing, without doing*, is not the response of our profession. We need additional studies where students report the changes that occur with mindfulness practice and mindfulness-embedded curricula in university preparation programs for educational leadership. This is the beginning of a deeper, contemplative leadership practice. The lessons learned in hospital settings, corporate America, and law schools, can be realities for the students who are training to lead this nation's schools. The efficacy of meditation for educational leaders is the experiential component of practice. And practice can be the balance for the theoretical/conceptual concepts in university preparation programs for educational leaders. *Simple, but not easy.*

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