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Mindfulness Training for Teachers: A Pilot Program

Maria Napoli, PhD

This article discusses the results of three elementary school teachers' feedback from a mindfulness-training program. Mindfulness is the ability to pay attention to what's happening now without judgment. The training consisted of breathwork, bodyscan, movement, and sensorimotor activities. Results of interviews with the teachers revealed that teachers used the mindfulness skills to (a) aid in curriculum development and implementation, (b) deal with conflict and anxiety, (c) improve the quality of their personal lives, and (d) facilitate positive changes in the classroom.

Keywords: stress; attention; wellness; curriculum; mindfulness

The role of a teacher has changed over the decades. Historically, teachers focused primarily on the cognitive development of children, more specifically, the "three Rs" of reading, writing, and arithmetic. Today's society has set new norms for family life, therefore, restructuring the role of the teacher. Mobility of families, the dwindling extended family, two-working-parent families, and single-parent families have created new and added demands for the school and teacher.

Teachers are now expected to be aware of the emotional challenges children face and are required to have the tools to deal with them. The increase in attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), stress, depression, and anxiety in students places more demands on teachers' knowledge and skills. The consistent increase in the number of students entering higher education has placed added pressure on teachers to develop appropriate curriculums. When we are mindful, we are able to increase our ability to pay attention. Developing the practice of mindfulness can help teachers meet the stressful challenges that confront them today.

This article discusses the incidence of stress and attention problems experienced by children and ultimately their teachers. Results of interviews with 1 fourth-grade and 2 third-grade teachers regarding their mindfulness-training experience are reported. It is hypothesized that with the increase in stress and overload of incoming information, children and teachers will benefit from mindfulness training by dealing with stress more effectively and by increasing their ability to focus. The purpose of the program was to see how the practice of

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mindfulness affected the teachers' behavior and perception with their students and in their personal lives.

A core ingredient in practicing mindfulness is focusing on the breath and what is happening in the body and mind—being a witness to one's personal experience. Breathing has been reported to regulate the autonomic nervous system, focus the mind, and increase self-awareness. If teachers can be "present," they can increase the quality of their teaching performance. When teachers are more focused, they may be better able to deal with stress.

STRESS AND CHILDREN

We develop the pattern of our stress response when we begin life and interact with the environment around us. Young (1995) believes that educators today are realizing that their students are overly stressed. Children's perception of life events has a direct influence on the learning process and academic performance. Walter Cannon coined the term "fight or flight, emergency response" (quoted in Dreher, 1996). When we feel danger, the hormone epinephrine (adrenaline) floods through every tissue in our bodies. These hormones are critical in an emergency situation (Dreher, 1996). Too often, teachers and children activate this "emergency" response for nonemergency situations, such as being late for an appointment, preparing for a test, or misplacing a book. If we continually release these stress hormones, we automatically place our bodies in overdrive, resulting in a depleted immune system and a cycle of exacerbated stress.

The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database lists more than 700 entries related to stress and children. Research has shown that children are under a great deal of pressure resulting in many of the same physiological symptoms of distress as adults (Miller & McCormick, 1991). Much of the research on children and stress was done two decades ago. With the increase in violence, divorce, new technologies, competition anxiety, and stress-related health problems such as asthma, stomach disorders, and headaches, schools are now being compelled to address this widespread problem.

Research has shown that incorporating stress-reduction programs into the school curriculum improves academic performance, self-esteem, concentration, and behavior problems (Ballinger & Heine, 1991; Cheung, 1999; Dendato & Diener, 1986; Kiselica, Baker, Thomas & Reedy, 1994; Shillingford & Shillingford-Mackin, 1991). Childhood stress is a precursor for stress as adults because we carry the patterns we learn as children into adulthood. Incorporating tools for stress reduction and relaxation is essential and needs to be an integral part of the effective education of teachers and children. In 1975, Herbert Benson coined the term "relaxation response," which involves bodily changes when one experiences deep muscle relaxation, a response against overstress, bringing the body back to a healthier balance. Focusing on the breath is a simple and effective way to achieve concentration, awareness, and relaxation.

There is a need to introduce the concept of stress and stress management in schools (Elkind, 2001; Gallagher & Satter, 1998; Kiselica et al., 1994, Young, 1995). Cheung (1999) investigated the effects of progressive relaxation training and found that 72 junior high school students who received the training showed significantly lower scores in trait anxiety levels and positive improvement in mood state. Dendato and Diener (1986) studied 45 test-anxious students and reported that relaxation/cognitive therapy was effective in reducing anxiety but did not improve test scores. Study skills alone had no effect on anxiety or test scores, but the combined therapy group found reduced anxiety and improved performance.

A study by Kiselica et al. (1994) examined the effects of environmental stress of 136 seven- and eight-year-old elementary school children over 2 to 4 years regarding the stability of social behavior, academic performance, and study skills. The results indicated that an increase in stressful life events was related to lower ratings of academic performance but were unrelated to ratings of social behavior when these were assessed concurrently.

According to Joanne Owens-Nauslar, director of professional development for the American School Health Association, 20% of school systems have some kind of wellness program (in Gaiam, 2001). The Accelerated School in Los Angeles has earned a reputation as a pioneer in innovative programs. They reported that school yoga has benefited the children in dealing with their increased stress. One parent said her daughter “feels more calm and relaxed and can concentrate better” after her yoga class. Parents cite the benefits of yoga in better grades and higher levels of concentration. Ungerleider (1986) studied Olympic athletes and found that imagery helped athletes maintain relaxation during competition and retain complete focus and concentration on mind-body interaction. Napoli (2002) studied the effects of mindfulness training with third-, fourth-, and fifth-grade students and found that after mindfulness training, children reported feeling more relaxed, thus relieving tension and anxiety. They also reported positive effects in behavior, mood, and attitude when paying attention to the breath. Children are better able to handle life events, including school and academics, when they have the tools to deal with conflict and the skills to pay attention.

ATTENTION AND CHILDREN

It is hypothesized that if teachers and children learn the skills of mindfulness they can increase children’s ability to pay attention to what is happening internally and externally. Larson and Kleiber’s (1993) research has shown that children pay attention more to activities that are self-controlled than to extrinsic activities. Cooley and Morris (1990) discuss attention as the foundation of most cognitive and neuropsychological functions in our current lifestyle, where multitasking has become the norm. Children are faced with information overload by watching hours of television, surfing the Internet, and playing video games. Wright and Vliestra’s (1975) developmental research on attention in children found that younger children learn by first exploring their environment, which then leads to habituation of attention. Attention begins to decrease in the order of importance the child places on the information. This “mechanism” must occur before the child masters the process of familiarization and schema formation. The child at that point can have logical control over selective attention.

Semrud-Clikeman et al. (1999) studied children with ADHD for 18 weeks using attention and problem-solving training. The intervention group showed improved performance on visual and auditory tasks on retest, and the control group showed no improvement. Gerstadt, Hong, and Diamond (1994) studied 160 three- to seven-year-old children and found that cognition, the understanding of a concept, was not enough for children to sustain attention because they were unable to inhibit previously learned information. Raessi and Baer’s (1984) research found that both normal and delayed children are on task in their teacher’s presence and off task in their absence. If teachers are aware of how children learn and are better equipped to pay attention themselves through mindfulness training, the children they teach have a better chance to absorb and retain information. When we are mindful, we implicitly or explicitly (a) view a situation from several perspectives, (b) see information presented in the situation as novel, (c) attend to the context in which we are perceiving the

information, and eventually (d) create new categories through which this information may be understood (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 111). If teachers and students develop their attention skills, teaching and learning can become more meaningful.

TEACHERS AND STRESS

Our children no longer go home to Ozzie and Harriet type families. The Economic Policy Institute reports that, in the last decade, a white middle class family's working hours increased from 2,460 hours to nearly 3,900 hours per year. African-American middle-income families work saw a 500 hours-per-year increase. (Buell, 2001, p. 74)

Teachers are often expected to teach without having the tools to deal with the many changes that have occurred over the past two decades. Teachers along with their students are experiencing more stress and burnout. To be successful with students, teachers need to have knowledge and skills as well as feel positive about teaching. Garmston (2001) stated, "Just like the children's story, *The Little Engine That Could*, teachers' belief that they can make a difference for students is one of the most powerful determinants in predicting teacher behavior and student success" (p. 72).

Embich (2001) studied 300 teachers of learning-disabled students who team taught with a general educator and found they were experiencing high levels of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a reduced sense of personal accomplishment. Adams (2001) suggested that teachers find ways of achieving a balance in their lives to deal with stress and lack of time. Issues such as lack of respect; emotional exhaustion; poor working conditions; salary; student, parent, and community concerns; and administration-related concerns all contributed to teacher burnout and stress (Adams, 2001; Buell, 2001; Cutrer & Daniel 1992; Embich 2001). If teachers practice mindfulness, they are better able to cope themselves and to transfer these skills to their students to help them focus and reduce stress.

TEACHERS AND MINDFULNESS

Solloway (1999) studied teachers' experiences using John Miller's contemplative practitioner model of classroom practice, a way of being in the classroom described as "being present." The technique of using the breath to anchor attention in the moment was used in both the mediation outside the classroom and the mindfulness practice in the classroom. Solloway (1999) found that students modeled their teacher's use of the breath as an anchor for mindful attention, using it to keep themselves on task. Marion (1997) explored dimensions that can foster or impede the healing process in medical education. She stated that "mindfulness allows for compassion, tolerance and empathy to grow and brings us to different ways of practicing and teaching medicine in life-affirming ways" (p. 6468).

Sarracino (1993) studied mindful literacy teaching within the context of a literacy methods course with 6 teachers. The two major research questions that were explored were the following: (a) To what extent do the teachers become mindful? (b) What is associated with the move toward mindfulness? Sarracino found that teachers gained insights that went beyond the parameters of mindfulness defined in the study. Vacarr (2001) studied training multiculturally competent teachers. She analyzed a tension-filled moment where she remained silent leaving behind the elevated position of teacher and confronting her own fear

of vulnerability and ineptitude. She attributes this to her practice of Buddhist mindfulness mediation as a strategy of entering both the interpersonal encounter of the classroom and intrapersonal encounter with oneself. Thornton and McEntee (1993) stated that "if a school or classroom is learner centered, then mindfulness is a relational mindset: learners are differentiated. Distinction making is the process of focusing on who the learner is, as well as the information constructed and shared" (p. 253).

Thornton and McEntee (1993), Wong (1994), and Ritchart and Perkins (2000) found that learner-centered classrooms that use mindfulness as a core ingredient in the student's learning experience have shown that students are able to transfer material learned to new and novel situations, are more creative, and think independently. The benefits of bringing mindfulness into the classroom can increase the quality of the educational experience as well as the relationship between student and teacher and students with students. The following program demonstrates how teachers responded to a mindfulness-training program in a southwestern elementary school.

PILOT TRAINING PROGRAM FOR TEACHERS

Purpose

One fourth-grade and 2 third-grade and elementary school teachers in a southwest elementary school participated in the mindfulness-training classes. The purpose of the mindfulness-training program was to see how the practice of mindfulness affected the teachers' behavior and perception with their students and in their personal lives.

Teacher Training

Bimonthly classes. The 3 teachers received 45-minute bimonthly mindfulness training with their students in the classroom beginning in September 2000 through May 2001. Paying attention to the breath, movement activities, and sensory-stimulating activities were used to facilitate "being in the moment." Table 1 displays the model that was used for the mindfulness classes.

Eight-week intensive mindfulness program. Classes met weekly for 2½ hours for 8 weeks and one 8-hour day of silence. The structure of the weekly classes was the following: (a) meditation, (b) body scan, (c) movement, (d) feedback on daily homework assignments (body scan, sitting meditation, and yoga), and (e) group discussions on articles related to mindfulness practice.

Teacher Interviews

The 3 teachers were asked questions related to their experience in the mindfulness classes in a semistructured 1½-hour interview (see Table 2). The questions were developed to assess whether the teachers benefited from the practice of mindfulness and whether they were able to transfer the practice from the classroom into their personal lives, reinforcing their use of the practice. The teachers were asked the same questions and the themes of their responses are discussed.

TABLE 1. Sample of Mindfulness Activities

Breath	Notice the breath	Put hands on belly for 1 minute, count your breaths
Body scan	Notice all body parts	Tighten and relax body from feet to head
Movement	Notice any changes in body	Stand in runner's stretch and notice any changes in body
Sensory	Be aware of your senses	Focus on sounds inside yourself and then outside self; notice the smells in your environment
Feedback	Notice your experience	Notice your experience before and after mindfulness

TABLE 2. Mindfulness Interview Questions

1. Has mindfulness influenced the way you teach? If so, how?
2. Has mindfulness influenced the way you interact with your students? If so, how?
3. Have you used mindfulness skills outside of the classroom? If so, how?
4. What are the different ways in which you use mindfulness techniques in your classroom?
 - a. Are there particular times of the school day that you use them more frequently? Why do you use them at that particular time of day?
 - b. Are there particular techniques that you use more frequently than others? Which ones? Why do you use them?
5. What changes have you noticed in the classroom since you implemented mindfulness?
6. Describe an incident when you and your class used mindfulness techniques. Why did you use them at that time? What was the effect?
7. Do you feel mindfulness should be implemented in the schools? If so, how?

Interview Feedback

The following feedback represents the teachers' experiences following 1 year of mindfulness practice. Although there were many responses and individual experiences reported by the teachers, the following represent the five common themes that emerged: (a) curriculum aid changes, (b) dealing with conflict and anxiety through the breath, (c) improved quality of personal life, and (d) changes in the classroom.

Curriculum aid changes. Curriculum aid (a) added depth to existing curriculum by focusing on key ideas, (b) enabled teachers to be better able to prioritize and prepare syllabus material, and (c) gave teachers more focus in implementing instruction. Teacher's comments were the following:

- "We put mindfulness with health and fitness and nutrition and we correlated it all. . . . They truly out-performed themselves."

- “I think it’s helped me really focus on priorities and curriculum, . . . has given me an added depth to where I want to take the kids.”
- “I think mindfulness has helped me make it a smaller vision, which I think has had a definite positive impact on my kids. . . . You know with the science, we have such a vast amount of science, we have six units to teach. . . . I sorted into more graphic organizers and say this is the key ideas that I really want to be teaching. . . . It’s more concept . . . than really content. . . . It was more process I guess is what I am trying to say.”
- “For example, one teacher developed an assignment where each child was to choose a daily activity routinely done at home, such as eating, brushing one’s teeth, or getting dressed. They were to write down everything they did during that activity. Their daily activity logs showed their awareness of the minute differences in their daily routines, ‘simply noticing’ the changes.”
- “[before a test] it was good learning for me because the children reminded me before we got started to try some of the mindfulness techniques.”
- “Even just during daily lessons, you’ll see them try to tense up and then relax, do some of the body scan things but more in a sitting position than lying down. I think that’s all been beneficial to my class this year . . . and definitely to me.”

Dealing with conflict and anxiety through the breath. This (a) had the most benefit helping children to focus and relax, (b) reduced anxiety before taking a test and often enabled them to finish testing early, (c) enabled children to make better decisions when in a conflictual situation, and (d) helped children redirect attention when they were off task. Teachers’ comments were the following:

- “Well, I do have a lot of conflict when I meet the kids at the playground, a lot of times. . . . I will talk to the kids that are involved, I always get them to breathe, relax and get focused on where we are because they are all talking at once, so if I can kind of calm them down before we try to resolve conflict, I found that has been very helpful.”
- “I’ve used mainly the breathing exercises at times when the kids are upset about something and need to talk through things, then I usually tell them to take a breath, regroup and then start to discuss whatever it is we need to talk about and then secondly, I use it before testing.”
- “I try to bring myself into the moment and calm myself down sometimes before I deal with some of the conflict situations that I have happening.”
- “the breathing, they do use a lot, they did say that they try some of the strategies on the playground when they’re getting really upset when in conflict they’ll try to walk away.”

Improved quality of personal life. The mindfulness practice (a) helped them eat slowly and consciously, (b) increased awareness in the body and in surrounding environment, (c) made it easier to wind down when stressed, and (d) resulted in a decrease in multitasking and increase in single tasks. Teachers’ comments were the following:

- [pregnant teacher stated] “Preparing for the birth of this little guy . . . I was scared to death, visualizations and total breathing, both of those things combined together have saved me a lot of pain and agony.”
- “I think the mindfulness classes have extenuated or exaggerated that aspect, you know, before I had it I might look out and say ‘oh, that tree is really pretty, but now I might look out and really concentrate on what it is about that tree that’s so pretty . . . take it down to another level of really thinking about it.’ ”

- “These kids are really hard on themselves by and large. . . . I’ve really found that mindfulness was really great for them, because it helped them to get in touch with those emotions, sometimes we can be stressed.”
- [using mindfulness,] “I do you know, like when I’m walking, I try my best to set aside at least 20 minutes a day to just be in that moment of nothing . . . and try to gain some strength and energy from that.”
- “I do rely upon the body scan a lot and just kind of getting my mind to wind down.”
- “Four years ago I would have thought I was very mindful and very focused, but in reality I was pretty purposeful. . . . But, being mindful to me is something really different, it’s just kind of in a sense accepting things as they come as where sometimes when we set a purpose for things we have expectations. . . . So, I’ve seen a tremendous amount of growth as I’ve been a part of it with my kids because each year I try to do it as much as I can with my class.”
- “I definitely feel that being in the moment I have reduced the stress of maybe what I felt before I took a walk.”
- “I’m trying to do two and three things at one time and so a lot of times I find myself just stopping, regrouping, taking a breath and then going back at it.”
- “They all set goals and a lot of it was mindfulness . . . for physically fit and more nutritionally, you know, thinking about what they were eating, how they were eating it, the way they were eating things, how they were exercising.”

Changes in the classroom. Teachers (a) used body scan before a lesson for centering, (b) felt more comfortable with students working independently, and (c) implemented their own mindfulness activities (i.e., mindfulness minutes, brain melt game where children imagined letting go of “mind noise”). Teachers’ comments were the following:

- [in the classroom,] “I always tell the kids we can do, we can go anywhere you want with the classroom, but you have to be able to come back.” [about the mindfulness trainer:] “She was letting them go out there and experience it, feel it, deal with it and you know little kids can’t come back that much and the mindfulness taught them to come back, it brought them back into the moment.”
- “I have a very high energy class so . . . I use it sometimes when I need to redirect their attention, which is quite often. . . . They’re very easily distracted so within a day I probably use it twice within a day because I don’t want to use it so much that they ignore it . . . cause I find with them I have to change my techniques frequently or it doesn’t work.”

Suggestions for Improvement

Teachers had suggestions on how the program can be better used in the school setting. Teachers reported that it would be helpful if all children could be trained, creating a better school environment as well as the classroom. They felt that they and the children need more consistent mindfulness training for skill development. Suggestions of moving the program into the physical education/health education curriculum would offer weekly classes and not infringe on classroom time. Classroom teachers could also participate and have their own training program with the benefit of continuing education and faculty development merit credits. In general, the response was quite favorable, and the teacher’s suggestions have helped in continuing the program during this academic year where it is housed in physical education. Teachers’ comments follow:

- “I probably would have liked it more consistently to have been on a weekly basis maybe for a half hour.”

- “For the kids that may learn even more concretely, if we could have taken them during those stressful moments and said, ‘What do you think might help you?’ ”
- “Have more meetings and communication during the year to evaluate the progress of the program.”
- “At the end of each class period, I think we need to do the activities for a half-hour and then just allow like a 10-minute wrap up period where you talk about what the objectives were of that class [instead of only using the feedback sheets].”
- “It comes to mind that the lesson we did when they were doing different smells, I think it would have been really good to bring the kids back together and then let them share some of their experiences and the effect that those smells had on them.”
- “It might be kind of neat to do a mid-year thing with the parents. If you do it mid year and then when the kids come home for the rest of the year they could share more with their parents what’s going on, what they’re experiencing.”

Limitations of the Program

Although the teachers in the program reported having a positive experience from the practice of mindfulness, the study is not without limitations. The sample was small and reflected only 3 teachers’ experiences. If the program is expanded to include a larger sample, more information on the teachers’ mindfulness practice and how it affected their teaching and personal lives can be explored. Also, if the teachers’ mindfulness practices were measured at different intervals during the year, a clearer picture of how often they used the practices would be known. Standardized or instruments developed to evaluate the frequency of mindfulness practice is needed. In addition, we might have seen times when there was an increase or decrease in their practice.

FUTURE DEVELOPMENT OF MINDFULNESS IN THE SCHOOL

“If in one class, one student lives in mindfulness, the entire class is influenced” (Hanh, 1987, p. 64). Based on the teachers’ experience in mindfulness training, it appears that moving the program into physical education is the best fit. It is important that both teachers and children receive training to facilitate a quality educational experience. Training the physical education teachers in the district so that they have the tools to teach the children is cost effective. It would be difficult to train all of the classroom teachers and the children. Because all children in the elementary school take physical education, training only the physical education teachers is the easiest way to ensure all students are reached.

Teachers can be awarded continuing education credits while developing their practice and incorporating mindfulness in the classroom. Incorporating mindfulness training into the physical education curriculum as a form of health education is an ideal way to begin teaching children at an early age how to deal with stress and anxiety, as well as how to focus and pay attention. Shillingford and Shillingford-Mackin (1991) stated that

in many schools, gym is a time during which the overworked classroom teacher may have 30 minutes to prepare for the rest of the day or simply to have a brief rest. However, a teaming of the classroom teacher and physical education teacher may do a great deal toward the development of a child’s self-image. (p. 465)

Parents and school administrators can also have the mindfulness training. If these teachers, parents, and school personnel practice mindfulness, they can transfer these tools to the children. This can be instrumental in reducing behavior problems, test anxiety, performance anxiety; improving self-confidence by reducing feelings of helplessness; and improving self-image by experiencing a sense of competence in problem solving.

Children today must make decisions that previous generations never considered, many of them life threatening. Shillingford and Shillingford-Mackin (1991) discussed how a wellness-training program can help develop a positive self-image, one of the best preventative tools a child can possess. Including mindfulness training in the school curriculum will in the long run save time for teachers. When children are able to deal with situations more effectively, teachers may have fewer interruptions during the day and more tools to deal with situations that do arise.

Creating wellness through a mindfulness program, as part of the school curriculum, can become an integral part of school life. A midwestern school has developed a wellness program that focuses on the importance of improving the entire school environment as a significant way to enhance students' wellness and safety. Gallagher and Satter (1998) stated that "when students, faculty, and community members nourish relationships, caring communities develop" (p. 11). The consistent reinforcement of using the mindfulness activities in each class will have long-lasting effects and can filter through the children's school experiences and personal lives.

SUMMARY

Teachers in the mindfulness-training program experienced improvement in their overall educational experience. Teachers reported using mindfulness as (a) a curriculum aid, by focusing on key ideas, narrowing down the content of information from quantity to quality and developing their own creative ways to bring mindfulness into the classroom; (b) a tool to deal with conflict and anxiety in the classroom, schoolyard, before tests, and in conflict situations; (c) a way to incorporate mindfulness into their personal lives; and (d) a tool to make changes in the classroom. As one teacher said, "letting the children experience, feel and deal with situations keeps them in their own experience." The life skill of mindfulness can offer many benefits to improve the quality of life for teachers both in and out of the classroom. This gift of being in the moment can create harmony amidst the many challenges and stresses teachers and children face today.

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