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A Research into Mindfulness and Wellbeing in the Classroom

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I declare that this research project is all of my own work and that all sources have been fully acknowledged.

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A Research into Mindfulness and Wellbeing in the Classroom

Introduction

In this research essay based around mindfulness and wellbeing in the classroom, I will discuss what mindfulness is, reasons why we use mindfulness in schools, the benefits it has on both students and teachers. What is meditation, how it trains your mind to become peaceful and calm. How there is huge pressure put upon teachers and how it can affect the students. How mindfulness and wellbeing can be a solution to reduce stress. Social and emotional learning preparing young students into adulthood. The concept of wellbeing will be explained around its four categories which include school conditions (having), health status (health), social relationships (loving) and means for self-fulfilment (being). A controversial topic that is often raised around the subject of mindfulness, is mindfulness just a way to distract us from our problems, blurring away the pain and stress we can be under? Is it a way for us to keep thriving even when we feel under intense pressure? All these topics will be discussed and outlined, focusing on the subject of mindfulness and wellbeing.

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a way of choosing to dwell and become aware of the present moment. The founder of the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, Jon Kabat-Zinn defines mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in

the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (1994, 4). Mindful people choose to live and be present completely in their bodies, rather than dwell with concerns about the future or regrets about the past. Practicing mindfulness begins to use all five senses, paying attention to what you hear, feel, see, taste and smell. Noticing without judging the thoughts and emotions, to notice the air going in and out through the nostrils, feeling of clothing against the skin, the smells and sounds in a room. Siegel describes how teachers can make the experience of learning as engaging and meaningful as possible, when they are mindful of their roles and aware of their intentions.

What is meditation?

Meditation trains your mind to become calm and peaceful. It is not a difficult practice to learn by no means according to Kabat-Zinn, “Thinking you are unable to meditate is a little like thinking you are unable to breathe, or to concentrate or relax”. With consistent practice, meditation is similar to any other skill, adults and students can learn to calm their minds. When beginning meditation, it is advised to find a place and a posture that will enable you to relax without falling asleep. While both inhaling and exhaling, beginning to pay attention to your breathing and being patient with yourself (Siegel, 2007). Mantras are another way to concentrate, simple statements repeated silently, for example “Breathing in, I smile” and “Breathing out, I calm” (Hanh, 2005). Loving kindness meditation is a type of meditation, which is effective for educators, leading to lower levels of stress and increased empathy according to research (Csaszar, Buchanan, 2015).

Mindfulness is a thought of being present, understanding the unique needs of each learner and paying attention. Understanding who we are as teachers is highly significant, therefore the study of the self is a logical place to start. An awakened teacher mindfully understands the self, the dynamic of journeying-leaving home, coming home wiser, healing, generally

compassionate and saner. Applying it to the generalised condition of our daily lives (Smith, 1999). A type of healing is essential to the educational systems, needing to emphasise compassion and empathy as important components to learning.

Mindfulness is a kind of spirituality that has its own integrity, simple and true (Smith, 1999). It's the kind of spirituality that is accomplished by stopping all actions and paying attention, making a space where one is generally free to involve themselves openly to the world without prejudgement (Smith, 1999). The word spirituality in contrast to religion links to our inner essence or being, reflecting on the deep question of who are you and in what way does this influence on the way you interact with the world. Understanding who we are and how we walk in the world is a process of self-reflection exploring deep memories, thoughts and experiences. Without mindfulness, it can be difficult to pay attention to stories unfolding because the mind is "too encumbered with what you thought was important in that moment to take the time to stop, to listen and to notice things" (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p.11). Storytelling can play an essential role in life-long learning and teacher professional development.

Reasons for mindfulness in schools

Students facing new challenges such as anxiety, trauma, distraction and Isolation. About one in three adolescents by the age of eighteen will meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder.

About 46% of children in the USA have been subjected to at least one form of adverse childhood experience. Teens spending about nine hours a day on digital technology excluding school work. About 40% of students feel isolation where they feel lonely and left out.

Educators are facing burn out between stress and their mental health. 61% of teachers have reported feeling stressed out. 58% of teachers have reported that their mental health is not good. Educators in public schools have the highest rate of quitting their jobs on record due to burn out. Support and investment need to be provided to educators for their development and well-being (mindfulschools.org).

Toxic stress is often replacing healthy stress. Toxic stress occurs when life's demands constantly gets in the way. Teachers are feeling more and more disjointed and suffering high burn out because of the increasing demands of the profession (Jardine, Clifford and Friesen, 2006). Many teachers are exhausted, already overburdened and worn out finding it impossible to see what could be possible (Jardine, 2012). There is a necessity to make time and spaces for reflection and contemplation referring as "pedagogy left in space" (Jardine, 2012).

Not only can mindfulness help students and educators survive, but thrive. Mindfulness practice can help reduce stress and anxiety for both children and adults, strengthening resilience and emotional regulation. Mindfulness practice improves interpersonal relationships, increases attention and strengthens compassion.

Without mindfulness, the mind continues to be overloaded with what you thought was important in that moment to take time to stop, to listen and notice things meaning you simply cannot pay attention to story telling (Kabat-Zinn, 2013). Storytelling plays an essential role in teacher professional development and life long learning, served as a deeper understanding.

Benefits of mindfulness

Mindfulness practice makes educators much more aware of the effects of stress and anxiety, developing the skills which will help effectively change stressful circumstances. It plays a big factor when it comes to our healthy cognitive functioning and decision making. Mindfulness

helps educators grow a stronger capacity for self-compassion, self-care and the ability to comfort, nurture and take care of themselves, students and others around them. It gives educators the skills to be present with their emotions, allowing new patterns and possibilities become capable to take on. Mindfulness creates a deeper connection with both the educators and others building empathy which supports effective leadership, collaboration and communication. Educators begin to grow resilience, helping them to deal with difficult situations with resources like patience, composure and flexibility. Peace, relaxation and calmness are positive states that need to be cultivated in order to take on daily challenges in schools (mindfulschools.org).

People who practice mindfulness have greater compassion towards themselves and others, helping those who are in need. Studies have shown it improves attention (Chiesa, Serretti, 2009), better performing tasks that involves a wide concentration span (Jha, Krompinger, Baime, 2007).

Benefits for Educators

Teachers who practice mindfulness experience the following events, greater efficiency in doing their job, reduced stress and burn out, classrooms that are much more emotionally supportive and much better classroom organisation. Reflective time is a luxury activity for the teacher after all the paperwork is done, as teachers are still stressed about time.

Mindfulness plays an important role in education, teachers suffer burnout and become too overwhelmed to even contemplate making the time and space for mindfulness. The eventual outcome of change will be determined if teachers can develop a holistic understanding of systems and how complications effect work of the classroom (Alberta Education, 2010).

Reflective process of life writing allows an entrance to the deep realm of teacher knowing, searching for self-understanding allowing the awakening needed to understand the other, and

our position in the interconnected communities of life (Chambers, Hasebe-Ludt, Leggo & Sinner, 2012)

Benefits for Students

Students who practice mindfulness benefit in terms of well-being, improved social-emotional skills and cognitive outcomes. Students begin to develop resilience in circumstances such as reduced anxiety and stress, emotional regulation, depression and post-traumatic symptoms. Social and emotional skills such as behaviour in school, empathy and perspective taking. Attention and Learning skills such as cognitive development and attention and focus.

The mindfulness.schools.org conducted two types of surveys to do with the introduction to mindfulness and mindfulness in the classroom courses with the results below.

Educator Results- 77% are much more content with their jobs. 82% bond better with their students. 80% deliver curriculum with more comfort. 90% state lower stress and greater self-compassion.

Student Results- 79% improved engagement, 83% improved focus, 76% expressed greater compassion and 89% improved emotional regulation. (www.mindfulschools.org)

Mindfulness meditation in the classroom

Educators fit in mindfulness into their own curriculum, each with a different aim. Some intend to make a connection between compassion, research and empathy, while others provide students with the chance to reflect on their work differently (Bush, 2013, Gunnlaugson, Sarath, Scott, & Bai, 2014, Tarrasch, 2015).

Mindfulness is commonly known as a state of focused attention on the experience of the present moment, meaning the actions that take place are observed in a non-reactive and judgemental way (Kabat-Zin, 2005). It helps to bring clarity and awareness to the present moment and helps to quiet the constant chatter on the mind (Brown, Ryan, 2003).

Mindfulness has the ability to reduce stress and anxiety, therefore managing to increase students academic performance and optimal learning (Bamber & Schneider, 2016., Hall, 1999). The course Foundations of Library and Information Science at the Faculty of Information, University of Toronto have chosen a secular move towards mindfulness to encourage involvement from students of any faith. These sessions focus on the present moment and its associated thoughts and feelings. At the beginning of class, there is a focused effort to let go of thoughts foretelling the future or those that hang onto the past. A conscious effort is made by the students to recognise all the smells, sounds and textures during these few minutes of complete stillness. It awakens students to the richness of every passing second, and usually within this understanding there is an increased room for acceptance and peace. Mindfulness meditation helps to clear students minds in advance of their lesson.

Social and Emotional Learning

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is knowledge brought into the classroom by teachers to direct students to towards becoming well-rounded and socially skilled individuals, equipped to responsibly find their personal and professional paths to adulthood. According to research, it is confirmed that SEL skills can be taught and measured, promoting positive development and reducing problem behaviours, improving student's academic performance, citizenship and general health (Durlak, 2014). Each framework links to related student outcomes such as improved social-emotional competence and greater academic achievement leading to career

success (Hawkins, 2015). SEL entails processes which people attain and successfully apply the attitudes, knowledge and skills to recognise and manage their emotions, to feel and express empathy towards others, to begin and achieve positive goals, to develop and maintain positive relationships and make responsible choices (Casel, 2013).

According to researchers Mark Greenberg of Pennsylvania State University, and Patricia Jennings of the University of Virginia, teacher's wellbeing and competencies can strongly influence and shape the nature of their relationships with students (Jennings, Greenberg, 2009). Students are more willing to take on challenging material and continue to complete difficult learning tasks in classrooms with warm teacher-student relationships, as it promotes deep learning among students (Merritt et al., 2012). Therefore, students perform lower when teachers unsuccessfully manage the social and emotional necessities of teaching (Marzano, Pickering., 2003). Whether the students are from rich or poor backgrounds, students will benefit from it, as it has many positive effects- citizenship, overall academic performance, school attendance and graduation, college preparation and workforce readiness (Bruce, Bridgeland, Hanriharan., 2013).

Well-being

Well-being is a condition in which it is likely that for a human being to satisfy his/her needs. Both material and non-material needs have to be considered, in the indicator systems of well-being. Having, loving and being are the three categories of needs that Allardt divides. 'Having' applies to material conditions and impersonal needs. 'Loving' stands for the needs relating to other people and to form social identities. 'Being' represents the needs of personal growth, being positive as supposed to the negative aspect referring to alienation, becoming distant (Allardt, 1989).

Well-being is divided into four groups: social relationships (loving), school conditions (having), health status and means for self-fulfilment (being). It is stated that school is the centre for health promotion among students and adolescents (WHO, 1977). It is stated that ‘A health promoting school can be characterised as a school constantly strengthening its capacity as a healthy setting for living, learning and working’ (WHO, 1998). Ten principles for the health promoting school outlined by the ENHPS conference resolution in Greece: empowerment and action competence, equity, democracy, school environment, teacher training, curriculum, collaboration, measuring success, communities and sustainability (Burgher et al., 1999). A school health programme should include eight elements recommend by Allensworth and Kolbe: physical education, health education, nutrition services, health services, counselling, psychological and social services, health promotion for staff and parent/community involvement and a healthy school environment.

Health is defined around social and psychological well-being (WHO, 1986). ‘Welfare’ is also another name for well-being in Nordic languages, covering the quality of life and the level of living (Allardt, 1989).

Is being a teacher stressful

According to decades of research, teaching is down as one of the most stressful professions in the human service industry (Montgomery, Rupp, 2005). When teachers judge a situation as but haven’t got the ability to change or improve it. Teachers in particular out of professional occupations, rank the lowest in believing that they have a say in what happens in the workplace (Gallup, 2014).

Occupational burnout is due to high levels of chronic stress. This is depicted by a low sense of success in one’s work, emotional exhaustion and depersonalisation (Maslach, 2001).

Teacher stress has been related to poor instructional practices, decreased job satisfaction and

poor student outcomes (Schwarzer, Hallum, 2008). Both teachers, physical health and wellbeing is affected by high levels of stress, therefore the quality and quantity of their sleep is affected. Negative affects of sleep disturbances include increased risk of depression, infectious disease and exposure to illnesses such as cancer and heart disease (Irwin, Olmstead, Carroll, 2016).

Students suffer collateral damage when teachers are stressed, therefore stress is contagious according to research. Students reveal higher levels of externalising problems such as impulsive behaviour, fighting and arguing. Interpersonal problems such as trouble resolving conflicts and expressing emotions. Internalising problems such as low self-esteem, anxiety and sadness. When teachers are not supported by their colleagues, students are affected by it (Milkie, Warner, 2011).

Classroom environment

Not only do teachers need to know how to openly teach social and emotional skills, they also need the nature, skills and the knowledge for creating a supportive, safe, caring and open school and classroom community. According to research, both academic learning and SEL are promoted under warm classroom environments and positive teacher-student relationships (Milkie, Warner, 1998).

The concept of wellbeing

The concept of wellbeing has been split into four groups. These are school conditions (having), health status (health), social relationships (loving) and means for self-fulfilment (being).

School conditions (having)

School conditions includes the environment inside a school and the physical environment surrounding a school. The areas to be considered are safe working environment, ventilation, noise, cosiness and temperature. School conditions also associate with the learning environment including group sizes, curriculum, punishments and schedules of studies. School lunches, counselling and health care is also another service given to students.

Social relationships (loving)

This area relates to the social learning environment, student teacher relationships, relations with group dynamics, school friends, bullying, decision making in school, cooperation between school and homes and the atmosphere of the whole school organisation. According to Samdal, a person's resources in a society is promoted and achievements in school are improved due to good relationships and atmosphere. An important role in well-being is the student-teacher relationship, meaning teachers feel good about each other, their students and their work, they are dedicated to both their students and the welfare of students (Hoy and Hannum, 1997). The negative part of social relationships is where bullying belongs, students may act as reinforcers, assistants of the bully, outsiders or defenders of the victim (Salmivalli et al., 1996).

Means for self-fulfilment in school (being)

'Being' relates to each person being appreciated as a valuable part of a society (Allardt, 1976; Allardt, 1989). A person must have opportunities for influencing the vital components of his/her life along with active leisure time. Vital parts of self-fulfilment are linked to opportunities for a meaningful working life and enjoyment of nature. Under the school context, every student should be thought as an equally important member of the school community. It is crucial that the opportunities for improving skills and knowledge highlighting the student's own interest fields at his/her own pace. Self-fulfilment is enhanced

by positive learning experiences. It is essential for students to receive respect for his/her work. In order for studying to be meaningful, respect is fundamental. Therefore, leisure time activities during breaks and a close link to nature helps to balance work and promotes self-fulfilment.

Health status

Illnesses are feelings that people encounter. A person can be diseased without feeling ill, even though a person cannot be ill without feeling it. 'Health status' includes physical and mental symptoms, common colds and flus, chronic and other diseases and illnesses. Health is a resource and an important part of wellbeing according to Allardt.

Is mindfulness just a way to distract us from our problems?

Jon Kabat-Zinn, who invented Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) states that mindfulness "may actually be the only promise the species and the planet have for making it through the next couple of hundred years". It simply helps people cope, a means of self-discipline, self help in disguise. Helping practitioners to adjust to the actual circumstances that caused their problems, setting them free. In order to do this successfully, teachers of mindfulness need to recognise that personal stress also has societal causes. Therefore, mindfulness could become something banal keeping people focused on themselves, if the cause of suffering is not addressed.

Mindfulness, has personalised stress. During times of uncertainty, it is a responsibility to learn how to be more mindful. Kabat-Zinn guarantees that "happiness is an inside job" simply requiring us to be present in the moment mindfully and intentionally without

judgement. Richard Davidson, a neuroscientist and meditative practice promoter, contends that “wellbeing is a skill” that can be trained, similar to training to run a marathon. Mental and emotional resilience of individuals is enhanced, endorsing neoliberal norms that everyone is welcome to choose their responses, manage negative feelings, and flourish through many different ways of self-care.

According to Carrette and King, mindfulness is simply chosen and reduced to just calming feelings of anxiety and unrest at the individual level, instead of looking to challenge the social, political and economic inequalities that cause such distress”. This type of mindfulness which is privatised and psychologised is political, as a result making individuals optimistic, mentally fit, resilient and attentive, so they may continue functioning within the system.

Mindfulness is placed as a force helping individuals to cope with the toxic influences of capitalism. Leaders of mindfulness want to reduce the stress of individuals without having to look deeper and more broadly at what caused the stress. Mindfulness is being sold to executives as a means to relieve stress, focus and bounce back from an eighty-hour working week therefore, improving productivity. Executives are not asked by mindfulness programmes to observe how their corporate policies and managerial decisions have established greed, ill will and misunderstanding. As soon as the pain disappears, its back to business as usual. The corporate agenda of maximising profits stays the same, even if individuals turn out to be nicer people due to mindfulness (The Guardian, 2019).

The whole point of mindfulness is to sharpen people’s focus and improve their performance at work and in exams. Does this mean that mindfulness is just a way of helping people cope with the toxic conditions that made them stressed in the first place? This may help people to sleep better at night. Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian philosopher has studied this trend, seeing

mindfulness “establishing itself as the hegemonic ideology of global capitalism”, helping people to partake in the capitalist dynamic while still appearing to be in good mental state.

The expression of resilience, self-mastery and happiness assumes wellbeing is purely just a case of developing a skill. Leaders of mindfulness like to say how we can train our brains to be happy, similar to exercising muscles. Wellbeing, happiness and freedom turn out to be the products of individual effort. Looking into it in a controversial aspect, these skills can be developed without reliance on relationships, external factors or social conditions. Beneath its therapeutic dialogue, mindfulness slightly reevaluates problems as the outcomes of choices.

Individuals are told that they will be happier and secure, with their lives in order if they practise mindfulness. Individuals are promised that they can achieve self-mastery, controlling people’s minds and emotions so that they can thrive and flourish amongst the notions of capitalism. The mindful obligation to accept things as they are and practice non-judgemental, present moment awareness performs as a social anaesthesia, maintaining the status quo.

Author of *Mindful Calculations*, Joshua Eisen would put it like this: “Like kale, acai berries, gym memberships, vitamin water, and other new year’s resolutions, mindfulness indexes a profound desire to change, but one premised on a fundamental reassertion of neoliberal fantasies of self-control and unfettered agency.” People just have to sit in silence, watch their breath, and wait. Individuals tend to cling to nurturing fantasies although they may be empty.

Conclusion

Based on my research, mindfulness and wellbeing is an effective way to reduce stress and anxiety in the classroom for both teachers and students. With regular practice, mindfulness strengthens resilience and emotional regulation, improving interpersonal relationships,

increases attention span and strengthens compassion. Well-being is a condition which satisfies a human being needs based on three categories having, loving and being. Schools are the centre of health promotion among students and adolescents, therefore health promoting schools continuously focus on creating a healthy setting for living, learning and working to students and teachers. Based on my research perhaps mindfulness is a way of distracting us from our everyday problems we face allowing us to cope. When teachers are stressed, the students suffer, therefore stress is contagious. Mindfulness helps us to stay calm and focused, enabling us to continue to work and thrive in the workforce as it helps blur out our problems. Mindfulness and well-being programmes in the workplace result in making individuals optimistic, mentally fit, resilient and attentive allowing them to be fully capable to function within the system. In my opinion, I find mindfulness really helped me get through lockdown as a student as it relieved any tension I would feel, studying from home was difficult not being with students in your course and who you haven't met before in person. Sometimes you can feel alone, like you are the only one dealing with the pressure of having to submit work when you don't get to see the rest of your peers, when really, they are all dealing with the same situation. After nine at night, I would go into my sitting room, switch off the lights, leave the lamp on and switch on the mindful movement on YouTube, I would lie down on the floor and listen to the dialogue for about twenty five minutes. After I finished meditating, I would feel weight lifted off my shoulders, any stress or anxiety I felt during the day would filter out of my mind. I believe mindfulness and well-being is the way forward and it does help us to deal with what life throws at us. Starting to think about what is important and what's not.

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