Mindfulness in Education

Introduction

Detrimental behaviors among students are a serious issue in the United States school system. Several interventions have been implemented over the years, but with few positive results. Recently, there has been a vast array of studies conducted to examine the possible positive outcomes of implementing meditation therapy and mindfulness into classrooms. Barnes, Bauza & Trieber (2003) contend, “The successful implementation of the intervention suggests the feasibility of school-based stress reduction programs in efforts to improve both physical and behavioral risk factors in youth” (p. 6). By learning these techniques in school, students can bring their newly acquired skills with them everywhere they go. The benefits are truly limitless.

Staggering Trends in our Youth

Because our adolescent population is in a transitional stage, they tend to struggle with dealing with stress and heightened emotions in a constructive way. Some areas of great concern for our youth are depression, anxiety, grades, tardiness and absenteeism rates, anger, learning disabilities, rule infractions and suspension rates. Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor (2010) reveal that we have seen a growing trend of numerous social, emotional and behavioral issues in our students in recent years. These issues are causing problems with their relationships, education and ability to grow into productive adults.
In developing a constructive plan to aid our students in overcoming these staggering trends, prevention is a key component. Beauchemin, Hutchins & Patterson (2008) explain, “Mindfulness meditation decreases anxiety and detrimental self-focus of attention which, in turn, promotes social skills and academic outcomes” (p. 34). The hope is to eliminate or minimize the problem before it arises. Studies show that any of these unfortunate issues can be prevented before they begin.

What is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness is the ability to be fully present, aware of our surroundings and calm in body and mind. Broderick & Metz (2009) describe mindfulness as, “intentional, non-judgmental awareness of present-moment experience” (p. 35). Salzberg (2016) explains that mindfulness is not the same as meditation. Though we may practice mindfulness through meditation, we do not need to meditate in order to be mindful. Mindfulness requires that we focus our attention on the here and now. Kabat-Zinn (2013) helps us understand that this is a process that “does not involve trying to get anywhere or feel anything special” (p. 10). Instead, mindfulness allows us to be exactly where we are, simply paying close attention to each individual moment.

This can be further clarified by explaining that there are two constructs by which mindfulness practices can be viewed and practiced. The first is highly influenced by Buddhism beliefs and influences, which is spiritual and meditative in nature. The second, which was developed by Ellen Langer, an American psychologist, takes a more psychological and behavioral approach (Albrecht, Albrecht & Cohen, 2012). Langer’s approach focuses on what is happening externally and responding mindfully, while the Buddhist-inspired approach is associated with a detachment of judgement to both
internal and external stimuli. Neither approach is considered to be better or worse, while both approaches have overlapping elements and concepts. They can be implemented either independently or simultaneously.

**Why is Mindfulness Important?**

The purpose of mindfulness is to help our society become more aware and less judgmental of reality, thereby allowing us to live more jubilant and fulfilling lives (Albrecht, Albrecht & Cohen, 2012). Kabat-Zinn (2013) writes that people with “a skeptical but open-minded attitude do best” with mindfulness practices (p. 20). He discusses the fact that our attitude plays a large role in the possible outcomes of practicing mindfulness and meditation. When we are able to intentionally set our mind to allow us to see everything as if we are seeing it for the first time, we will then get the best results from the practice. Being aware of our constantly changing internal and external circumstances is something we must practice with focus and determination.

**The Impacts of Mindfulness in the Classroom**

For many years, mindfulness exercises and therapies have delivered exemplary results in bettering the lives of adults. Strong evidence supports the notion that adult populations benefit greatly with the introduction of mindfulness training into their lives. These benefits are bountiful, “including improvements in attention and awareness, reductions in health problems and stress-related medical conditions, and enhanced positive emotions and well-being” (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010, p. 139).

Partially due to the positive outcomes of adult mindfulness practices, these programs are now being carried out in schools across the nation. There are many ways in which to teach these practices. However, Albrecht (2016) stresses the importance, for
those considering bringing the mindfulness practice into their classrooms, to first become knowledgeable and “live the practice in his or her own life” (p. 128). Living this practice elevates the feeling of connectedness with regard to happiness, health and clarity of mind. When the overall health and well-being of teachers is being nurtured, they are better able to pass that on to their students. This connection felt between the students and their teacher results in more effective learning.

Hooker and Fodor (2008) emphasize the fact that similar to most interventions, implementing customized practices for students is a key component of teaching them mindfulness techniques. Some students may experience anxiety or stress as a result of these exercises because they are not comfortable paying this close of attention to themselves or their emotions. Moreover, they may become increasingly aware of their possibly negative feelings, in which case some possible solutions for these children may be to practice letting go, or focus their mindfulness on control of the present moment.

The idea of introducing mindfulness practices into the lives of children and adolescents in the school environment is still in its early stages of development, but overwhelming, growing evidence suggests there are many benefits to its implementation (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Most of these benefits include increased attention, enhanced empathy, creativity, concentration and emotional intelligence. Mindfulness also helps strengthen our approach to healthy emotion management, alleviates anxiety and reduces stress. Additionally, research has shown that mindfulness meditation practices have contributed to positive moods and increased the functionality of immune systems.
Evidence suggests that classroom and school-based measures that focus on the mindfulness of our students can cultivate social and emotional fitness, as well as serve as a deterrent of negative behaviors among our youth that endures into their adult years. It is believed that the essential time period to implement such a program is between the ages of 9 and 12. This is imperative because the ages of 9 and 10 are considered to be preadolescence, and the ages of 11 and 12 are classified as early adolescence. Therefore, these are formative years for children, and the application of these practices is likely to support intrinsic and positive psychological, social and cognitive growth and development. Though transitions can be tough periods in one’s life, it is extremely important to remember that these times should not be thought of with negative regard, but rather focused on the fact that they are very much “windows of opportunity” (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010, p. 140). It is during this stage in development that we must seize the opportunity to enhance health and bolster developmental success among our youth.

The studies being conducted to determine if and how these programs impact school communities range from outcome based studies to more qualitative modes of measure. For example, studies are just recently being conducted in an effort to consider how children perceive and respond to mindfulness practices. However, this type of data is difficult to measure because of the variables involved. If students indicates that they felt happy after a mindfulness technique practice, it is challenging to measure how happy they were or how long they experienced this emotion (Ager, Albrecht & Cohen, 2015).
The research that has been conducted to determine if mindfulness training will help our children and youth, especially since the new millennium, provides compelling evidence which supports the idea that the benefits do include significant improvements in areas of attention and concentration as well as social competence (Albrecht, 2015). Evidence also suggests that when this training is implemented rigorously and consistently, the outcomes are powerfully positive (Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010).

**Mindfulness in the Art Room**

The notion of bringing this holistic mode of teaching into the art room is still relatively new. However, many are beginning to observe the growing need for this connection. The visual arts awaken “emotions associated with spirituality, such as awe, wonder, compassion, forgiveness, mindfulness, and caring” (Campbell, 2011, p. 20). Studies reveal that, when practicing mindfulness, the participants’ intentions sequentially shift from self-focused well-being to the overall well-being of others, their community and the world as a whole (Albrecht, 2016).

The unification of visual art education through holistic practices is simply a matter of restructuring curriculum practices to better suit the needs of students. Lessons can easily be created by having conversations with students about their interests with regard to the world around them. With this in mind, teachers can develop meaningful lessons that encompass awareness about the connections between self, community and social responsibility (Campbell, 2011).

We are creators in the art room. Therefore, implementing mindfulness practices into our classrooms is ideal and logical. “The act of creating literally comes out of nothing or nothingness” (Novosel-Beittel, 1979, p. 6). There exist three distinct moments
during creation. These moments are *nothing, becoming* and *being*. In order to successfully transition through these moments, we need to have developed an enduring understanding and skillful application of meditative thinking. During the first moment, artists’ minds need to be clear, or in a state of nothingness, before moving on to the second moment of mindfulness, engaging in its current state of thoughts, emotion and feeling. Finally, the third state, *being*, is illuminated by the first and second moments. It is now that we may bring something new into the world.

Because mindfulness exercises have a primary concern with breathing, art teachers can easily implement these practices into their classrooms in multiple ways. For example, students may practice simple, deep breathing exercises, while paying close attention to their bodies, or mindfulness methods can be carried out while creating works of art. Implementing it in this way, teachers may ask students to breathe in deeply and upon exhaling, create one single mark, with their chosen media, in unison with their breath. With each new breath, a new mark is made. This practice helps students focus their energies equally between physical, mental and visual observations.

**Conclusion**

Training students in mindfulness has shown real capabilities in improving their self-acceptance and self-understanding, as well as improving their memory, attention and focus. Mindfulness can also deter young people from developing stress-related illnesses, depression and anxiety. Furthermore, it has shown positive results in deterring absenteeism rates, anger, rule infractions and suspension rates. Dalai Lama said, “Understanding that disturbing emotions are destroyed by special insight with calm abiding” (Hooker & Fodor, 2008, p. 78). Ultimately, the goal is for students to become
comfortable with implementing these practices into their daily lives. They can then draw on these techniques throughout their day, whenever they need them, to assist in refocusing their energy and focus on the calming nature of their spirit.
References


