

Mindfulness in School Curricula

by Deborah Cohen

Yoga and meditation fit into the broader umbrella term of mindfulness practices.

Mindfulness is non-judgmental awareness of what is happening as it is happening. It is “the ability to pay attention to what is happening now without judgment” (Napoli, 2004).

There are some forward thinking schools which are integrating mindfulness instruction into their curricula for students and for teachers because of the tremendous benefits including lower levels of stress reactivity, improved mood and ability to focus, improved self-esteem, improved physical health and better reported behavior and academic performance.

The physiological benefits of yoga and meditation have been demonstrated in numerous studies. The research results show that meditation alters the brain so that there is greater activation in the left prefrontal cortex as compared to the right, a state associated with elevated moods (Davidson and Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Studies have demonstrated meditation’s effect on anxiety and panic disorder (Edwards, 1991; Miller, Fletcher, & Kabat-Zinn, 1995); substance abuse (Gelderloos, Walton, Orme-Johnson, & Alexander, 1991); and reduction of depressive symptoms in nonclinical populations (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Bronner, 1998). Yoga has been shown effective in improving body image and preventing eating disorders. Due to the emphasis on feeling the body, one’s tendency to objectify it is lessened (Boudette, 2006; Daubenmier, Jennifer, 2003; Duabenmier, Jennifer, 2005).

In school settings

“The Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) database lists more than 700 entries related to stress and children” (Napoli, 2004). With an increase in violence, divorce, competition anxiety, and stress-related health problems like anxiety, asthma, stomach disorders and headaches, it becomes critical for schools to teach students how to effectively manage stress. Several studies have shown “the effectiveness of relaxation (Benson et al, 2000), meditation (Linden, 1973) and yoga (Angus, 1989; Hopkins, 1979) on students’ concentration and stress levels, as well as their academic performance” (Slovacek, Tucker and Pontoja, 2003). Benson’s was a 3 year study examining the effects of a relaxation response curriculum taught to middle school students. The curriculum included identifying personal stressors, learning the physiology of stress, being aware of the body, performing stretching exercises and “mini-relaxations,” mindfulness training, and having a mental focus to obtain a relaxation response. The students who experienced this curriculum demonstrated better work habits, improved attendance and levels of cooperation, and had substantially higher GPA’s than those who did not take this curriculum.

Cheung’s study (1999) introduced progressive relaxation training, where students consciously relax their bodies part by part, to 72 junior high school students. Those who received the training showed significantly lower scores in trait anxiety and positive improvement in mood state. Stueck and Gloeckner’s four-year study (2005) looked at the results of a Training of Relaxation with Elements of Yoga for Children (TorweY-C) technique for 48 fifth grade students. This technique was comprised of fifteen meetings and included an opening relaxation, yoga exercises and then final activities to integrate the effects of the training: games or massage or sensory exercises or guided imagery

with instructions for children to pay attention to their emotions as well as the external stimuli. Students experienced significant reductions in aggression, helplessness in school, static balance ability, reduced physical complaints, and improved stress-coping abilities. Goldberg, Miller, Collins and Morales' study (2004) looked at the effect of teaching relaxation skills to six upper elementary school students with autism who showed overt signs of anxiety and dysfunction under stress. The relaxation program included yoga exercises and breathing, guided imagery, role-playing, discussion, stories and mnemonics to encourage the ability to use the relaxation skills in other settings. After almost every class, students had lowered pulse rates ($p \leq 0.01$) and parents' and teachers' evaluations rated the students as demonstrating lower stress levels. Classroom teachers reported increased alertness after sessions and more self-monitoring. Teachers were also able to use relaxation cues learned in the sessions to help children de-escalate in volatile situations. Aron and colleagues (1980) conducted a four-year study of undergraduate students taking the Transcendental Meditation Program. The results showed an increase in general intelligence and an increase in each of the following personality measures: social self-confidence, sociability, general psychological health and social maturity. Slovacek, Tucker and Pantoja (2003) conducted a study of 405 students and 18 core subject teachers and yoga instructors in an urban K-8 charter school. The yoga class participation appears to have improved students' self-esteem, behavior (fewer discipline referrals), physical fitness and academic performance.

The mindfulness practices have been targeted exclusively towards teachers, as well. Maria Napoli's small qualitative study (2004) showed that teachers used the mindfulness skills they were taught to help develop and implement curriculum, to deal with conflict

and anxiety, to improve the quality of their personal lives and to facilitate positive changes in the classroom. Winzelberg and Luskin's study of the effectiveness of meditation training for student-teachers (1999) showed significant reduction in stress symptoms compared to the control group. In fact, India's Position paper for the National Focus Group on Health and Physical Education 3.5 recognizes yoga's importance in the school curriculum both for the physical and psychosocial and mental development of the child.

The results of the studies clearly demonstrate the benefits to schools of incorporating mindfulness training for both students and faculty alike. The time taken to develop this skill may ostensibly compromise the amount of traditional subject coverage; however, the improvements in behavior, physical and emotional health, ability to focus, and improved learning suggest that the time invested would be more than worthwhile.

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