# Mindfulness and Schools*

Time Magazine's cover story for Feb., 3, 2014 was entitled: *The Mindful Revolution: The science of finding focus in a stressed-out, multitasking culture.* It states:

> ... to view mindfulness simply as the latest self-help fad ... misses the point of why it is gaining acceptance with those who might otherwise dismiss mental training techniques closely tied to meditation—Silicon Valley entrepreneurs, Fortune 500 titans, Pentagon chiefs and more. If distraction is the pre-eminent condition of our age, then mindfulness, in the eyes of its enthusiasts, is the most logical response. Its strength lies in its universality. Though meditation is considered an essential means to achieving mindfulness, the ultimate goal is simply to give your attention fully to what you're doing. One can work mindfully, parent mindfully and learn mindfully. One can exercise and even eat mindfully. The banking giant Chase now advises customers on how to spend mindfully.

Over the last few years, interest in mindfulness applications in schools has grown. This *Information Resource* is meant to provide brief answers to the following questions:

- What is mindfulness?
- How widely are mindfulness programs being applied in schools?
- What approaches are being advocated for use in schools?
- What are the concerns about using mindfulness practices in schools?

## What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness is a meditative practice that is being employed in psychology and education to address a variety of behavior, emotional, and learning problems. Scholars indicate that the term "mindfulness" has its origins in Buddhism. It is derived from the Pali-term *sati* and its Sanskrit equivalent *smrti*. Over time, the term has been adopted/translated to refer to such processes as "awareness", "retention," "memory," and "presence of mind,"and it has been introduced into secular mainstream practices.

Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003) defines mindfulness as applied currently in Western culture as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience."

Scott R. Bishop and his colleagues (2004) proposed the following two-component model in defining mindfulness as it applies to psychology:

> The first component involves the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience, thereby allowing for increased recognition of mental events in the present moment. The second component involves adopting a particular orientation toward one's experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance.

*The material in this document was culled from the literature and drafted by Adele Buffington as part of her work with the national Center for Mental Health in Schools at UCLA. Key references used are cited in the reference list at the end of the document.

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**Concerns about Definitions of Mindfulness**

Definitions have been interpreted selectively in research and practice (e.g.,as a mental state, as a set of skills and techniques). For example, the Greater Good Science Center at the University of California, Berkeley (2014) views mindfulness as "a method that focuses the human brain on what is being sensed at each moment, rather than ruminating on the past or future." This includes moment-by-moment awareness of thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and the surrounding environment. With respect to stress reduction, the emphasis has been on nonelaborative and nonjudgmental acceptance of each thought, feeling, or sensation. Others view the process as one of connecting with one's current inner experiences with openness, curiosity, and a willingness "to be with what is."

## How widely are mindfulness programs being applied in schools?

Increasingly, educators are looking for new ways to promote student social and emotional development and address inattention and disconnectedness from classroom instruction, high levels of stress, and other factors that interfere with learning and teaching. As a result, mindfulness is finding its way into schools.

There is no body of data on the nature and scope of mindfulness applications in schools in the U.S.A. (or in the other countries exploring such practices). An internet search finds various projects and programs each of which report involvement with a range of schools. For example, the *Mindful Schools program* indicates that it has taught over 18,000 children in 53 schools since 2007. They also state "Over 200,000 children and adolescents in 48 U.S. states and 43 countries have been impacted by our graduates." (This estimate is attributed to their online training.)

For examples of how widely mindfulness is being applied, see Mindfulnet.org. Go to http://mindfulnet.org/page7.htm and then go to the following Quick Links:

- Mindfulness in schools overview Case Study: Public Schools in the UK
- Case Study: Piedmont Elementary, USA
- Mindfulness in schools links
- Mindfulness in schools video clips
- Mindfulness in colleges and universities overview Case Study: Univ. of Minn.
- Mindfulness club, USA
- Mindfulness in colleges and universities links
- Mindfulness in colleges and universities video clips

Based on media and internet coverage, it seems fair to conclude that mindfulness activities are being enthusiastically promoted for use in schools, and a body of evaluative school-based research is starting to appear (Campbell, 2013). At the same time, it is well to keep in mind that mindfulness research is in its early stages and findings are too limited to use as the sole bases for making major policy decisions about adoption by schools.

## Two Examples of Research on Applying Mindfulness Practices in School

"A randomized controlled pilot trial of classroom-based mindfulness meditation compared to an active control condition in sixth-grade children" by Brittona, Leppa, Nilesa, Rochaa, Fishera, & Golda (2014). *Journal of School Psychology, 52*, 263–278. http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022440514000296

*Abstract:* A pilot trial examining the effects of a nonelective, classroom-based, teacher-implemented, mindfulness meditation intervention on standard clinical measures of mental health and affect in middle school children. A total of 101 healthy sixth-grade students (55 boys, 46 girls) were randomized to either an Asian history course with daily mindfulness meditation practice (intervention group) or an African history course with a matched experiential activity (active control group). Self-reported measures included the Youth Self Report (YSR), a modified Spielberger State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, and the Cognitive and Affective Mindfulness Measure –Revised. Both groups decreased significantly on clinical syndrome subscales and affect but did not differ in the extent of their improvements. Meditators were significantly less likely to develop suicidal ideation or thoughts of self-harm than controls. These results suggest that mindfulness training may yield both unique and non-specific benefits that are shared by other novel activities.

"Mindfulness Training and Classroom Behavior Among Lower-Income and Ethnic Minority Elementary School Children" by Black & Fernando (2013). *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 22*, 1-5. http://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10826-013-9784-4

*Abstract:* This field intervention trial evaluated the effect of a 5-week mindfulness-based curriculum on teacher-ratings of student classroom behavior at a Richmond, CA public elementary school, and examined if the addition of more sessions provided added benefit to student outcomes. Seventeen teachers reported on the classroom behaviors of 409 children (83 % enrolled in a California free lunch program and 95.7 % ethnic minority) in kindergarten through sixth grade at pre-intervention, immediate post-intervention, and 7 weeks post-intervention. Results showed that teachers reported improved classroom behavior of their students (i.e., paying attention, self-control, participation in activities, and caring/respect for others) that lasted up to 7 weeks post-intervention. Overall, improvements were not bolstered by the addition of extra sessions, with the exception of paying attention. The implications of this study are limited due to the lack of a mindfulness program-naïve control group, yet findings suggest that mindfulness training might benefit teacher-based perceptions of improved classroom behavior in a public elementary school, which has practice implications for improving the classroom learning environment for lower-income and ethnically-diverse children.

On their website, Mindful Schools indicates that they partnered with the University of California, Davis in the 2011-12 school year to "conduct the largest randomized-controlled study to date on mindfulness and children, involving 937 children and 47 teachers in 3 Oakland public elementary schools." The research is to be reported in a journal article; an online pre-publication report indicates that, immediately after the program ended, student behavior improved significantly in all four areas measured – paying attention, self-control, classroom participation, and respect for others – and that these gains were maintained seven weeks later.
http://www.mindfulschools.org/about-mindfulness/research/

***Note:*** While limited in significant ways, general research on mindfulness practices has suggested promise in addressing health issues and wellness (e.g., reducing stress; lowering blood pressure, boosting the immune system, increasing attention and focus; decreasing emotional reactivity).

## What approaches are being advocated for use in schools?

Mindfulness approaches used in schools draw on four mindfulness-based manualized therapeutic approaches: *Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction* (MSBR; Kabat-Zinn, 1982, 1990, 2003), *Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy* (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002), *Acceptance and Commitment Therapy* (ACT; Hayes, Strosahl, & Wilson, 1999), and *Dialectical Behavior Therapy* (DBT; Linehan, 1993). MBSR and MBCT are derived mainly from the practice of meditation. ACT and DBT include skills identified with mindfulness approaches, but are not specifically identified as mindfulness-based. ACT and DBT both focus on active acceptance as a treatment goal and as a means to achieve that end; MBSR and MBCT do not have acceptance as an explicit goal. Since schools are not clinical settings, school mindfulness programs usually do not describe themselves as based in therapeutic approaches such as MBSR, MBCT, ACT, or DBT.

Presently, there are several mindfulness curricular programs designed as in-school interventions. Below are three examples:

***Mindful Schools program*** http://www.mindfulschools.org/

The *Mindful Schools program* is offered by an independent non-profit organization. The curriculum lasts five weeks, with three sessions per week, and focuses on mindfulness practices designed to help children pay attention, build empathy and self-awareness, improve self-control, and reduce stress.

Their website states:

> Mindfulness develops an "inner compass" – a true lifetime skill that is highly preventive. Understanding one's own thoughts and feelings can save massive future expenditures to address juvenile delinquency, poor academic performance, stress, mental disorders, etc… In addition, having a mind that is calm, focused, and empathetic allows children to increase their scholastic aptitude, particularly if they experience a high degree of stress outside of school.

Children and teachers are trained in mindfulness, engaging in such activities as mindful breathing, mindful listening, mindful walking, body scan, mindful eating, mindful test taking, and exercises in empathy. The program's website indicates it has been used in 53 schools since 2007 and has taught over 18,000 children. (See evaluation data from Black and Fernando in the exhibit on the previous page.)

***Mindfulness in Schools Project (MiSP)*** http://mindfulnessinschools.org/

The *Mindfulness in Schools Project* (MiSP) is a British program for students ages 12 to 16. The curriculum consists of nine scripted lessons, delivered weekly by trained classroom teachers. The nine lessons are built around the phrase *Stop, Breathe, and Be* which is represented by the symbol .b [dot-be]. As summarized online, here are the nine lessons:

(1) An introductory lesson designed to persuade young people that mindfulness is worth learning about by making it relevant to their lives.
(2) Introduces students to the thing "we call our 'attention' which, like a puppy, needs to be trained."

(3) Intended to nurture an attitude to everyday experiences – one of curiosity and kindness – that can be calming and nourishing.
(4) Explains the "tricks" our mind plays that lead to stress and anxiety, and gives techniques to deal with them.
(5) "Comes to the heart of mindfulness" and teaches how to respond, rather than react, to whatever happens.
(6) Shows that mindfulness is not just something we do sitting or lying down. It also looks at high performance in sport.
(7) Offers a new way of relating to thoughts. ("We don't have to let them carry us away to places we'd rather not be.")
(8) Deals with the greatest challenge of all – dealing with difficult emotions.
(9) Designed to consolidate the key techniques from .b and inspire students to use what they have learned in the future.

An evaluation compared six schools and over 500 students whose teachers had been trained in the program with six similar schools where teachers had expressed interest in mindfulness but had not been trained in MiSP. The program states the following findings: Compared to students in the non-MiSP schools, MiSP students reported significantly decreased depression symptoms immediately after the end of the program. In follow-up surveys conducted three months after the program ended (during what is described as a stressful summer exam period) MiSP students reported significantly less stress and symptoms of depression and significantly greater well-being compared to their non-MiSP counterparts. In addition, the indicated findings note that the more frequently students reported using mindfulness practices, the better their scores were. These results are interpreted by the program as indicating that "the MiSP, and mindfulness in general, shows promise as a tool to bolster adolescent mental health, and possibly their academic achievement as well."

***Move-into-Learning (MIL)*** http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aukqfWGYeoA

This program comes from faculty in the College of Medicine at Ohio State University (Klatt, Harpster, Browne, White, & Case-Smith, 2013). It is an eight-week mindfulness-based program called Move-into-Learning (MIL). In the study reported in 2013, it was administered to two classrooms of third graders at a low-income, urban elementary school in the Midwest. The intervention involved a weekly 45-minute session, led by an outside trainer, that included mindfulness meditation, yoga and breathing exercises set to music, and positive self-expression through writing and visual arts. In addition, the two classroom teachers led shorter, daily practice sessions to reinforce the skills.

As with other studies cited, methodological limitations make the findings only suggestive. The researchers indicate that: At the end of the eight weeks, the teachers reported "significantly less hyperactive behavior, ADHD symptoms, and inattentiveness among their students." The improvements were reported as sustained two months later and after the program ended. The researchers also state: "What's more, interviews with the participating teachers revealed that they found the program to be feasible to implement, appropriate and enjoyable for their classrooms, and beneficial for students' attendance and behavior. These promising preliminary results seem to warrant larger, more rigorous studies of the program."

### Relationship to Social-Emotional Learning

In some form or another, every school has goals that emphasize a desire to enhance students' personal and social functioning. Such goals can be seen as reflecting views that social and emotional growth has an important role to play in

- enhancing the daily smooth functioning of schools and the emergence of a safe, caring, and supportive school climate
- facilitating students' holistic development
- enabling student motivation and capability for academic learning
- optimizing life beyond schooling.

Such abstract goals encompass a wide range of specific objectives. From our Center's perspective, some of the specific objectives of mindfulness programs overlap some, but not all, facets of efforts to enhance social-emotional learning and development. The overlap is what seems to attract some schools.

The relationship between mindfulness and social emotional learning programs is apparent but has not been well articulated. Phuket International Academy [PIA] in Thailand stresses the relationship, but only explains that "teachers integrate key SEL and mindfulness based practices into their everyday teaching in order to establish a supportive and positive classroom climate. In the [primary program], the focus is on enhancing emotional literacy, relationship skills, child safety, and the cultivation of inner resilience. At the [middle] level, PIA implements the Mindfulness in Schools Project ".b" (Stop, Breathe, and Be!)."

As schools consider adopting mindfulness programs, they need to be able to articulate what they already are doing to enhance personal and social functioning and what a proposed mindfulness program can add.

## What are the concerns about using mindfulness practices in schools?

Aside from general concerns raised about mindfulness practices, the application of mindfulness programs in schools (as with the introduction of any new set of practices) raises a variety of matters that must be addressed. Here are some major examples.

(1) *Costs vs. benefits.* Every new school practice that is added involves expenditures of sparse and already overtaxed resources. As a result, anything added must be weighed against how much benefit the new practice will bring in terms of the big picture of school improvement policy and practice. Concern has been raised that mindfulness programs will produce only limited benefits and that the efforts are likely to draw too much time, money, and attention away from full appreciation of *social emotional learning* and away from addressing *systemic changes* that are needed to counter the broad range of barriers to learning and teaching.

(2) *Projectitis.* While advocacy for mindfulness programs in schools is well-intentioned, policy research shows that programs such as these usually are implemented as special projects and pilot demonstrations. As such, they are directed at a relatively few students and tend to be short-lived. This type of school enterprise has been characterized as "projectitis." Critics stress that the piecemeal nature of ad hoc projects increases what is an already highly fragmented approach to tackling problems at school. Even worse, such ad hoc activity is seen as contributing to the ongoing marginalization of efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach to addressing a full range of overlapping learning, behavior, and emotional concerns.

(3) *Overemphasis on curricular approaches.* Both the general focus on social-emotional learning and the specific efforts to introduce mindfulness at schools have stressed "curricular" content and activities. This has given rise to the concern that too little attention is given to capitalizing on the many natural, everyday opportunities at schools to promote whole student development (and minimize transactions that interfere with positive growth).

(4) *Concern about a link to religion.* Given the roots of mindfulness are widely acknowledge to be in Buddhism, issues of separation of church and state in public education are frequently raised. And in one well-publicized situation, public reaction forced a school to end its mindfulness program.

## Concluding Comments

With the widespread popular interest and the involvement of a considerable range of universities, mindfulness has become a major topic of discussion. Currently, advocates are knocking on school doors suggesting how mindfulness programs can help students.

Schools, of course, are constantly confronted with requests and mandates for another initiative – for example, another pilot project, another program to address a specific learning, behavior, emotional, or physical health concern. Most schools are stretched thin by the many programs already underway. As a result, a common reaction of principals is: *Enough - we can't take on another thing!* Moreover, concerns are being raised about the pernicious effects on school improvement of the ad hoc addition of another program.

So, while there is much to recommend teaching children (and staff) to be mindful, decision makers asked to add the programs to schools need to answer such fundamental questions as:

(1) How much will the proposed mindfulness program contribute to efforts to enhance the school's improvement agenda with respect to ensuring equal opportunity for all students to succeed at school?

(2) Where does the proposed program fit into that agenda?

(3) In adopting the program, will a school have to give up something important?

(4) Will the program help coalesce or interfere with efforts to develop a unified, comprehensive, systemic, and equitable approach to enhancing healthy development and addressing a full range of overlapping learning, behavior, and emotional problems?

Advocates asking schools to adopt mindfulness programs need to consider all this.

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