Article submitted to DECP Debate in November 2013 and published in March 2014

DECP Debate Edition 150

Mindfulness in schools: taking present practice into account

Jacqueline R A Stone

An increasing number of studies indicate the potential benefits of mindfulness-based interventions for children and adolescents in educational settings (Burke, 2009; Harnett & Dawe, 2012; Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Such benefits include improved academic performance, classroom participation and attention as well as reductions in levels of stress, anxiety and depression (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Schoeberlein & Sheth, 2009).

This paper will discuss some of the issues that I am currently investigating in my doctoral research in light of the proliferation of mindfulness-based interventions. These issues include how we define mindfulness and mindfulness-based approaches (MBAs). More practical and logistical issues are also pertinent, such as how mindfulness-based activities are incorporated into the school day, by whom and how MBAs fit in with present practice in schools and what present practice actually involves.

Definitions of mindfulness and mindfulness-based approaches

There are many definitions of mindfulness in the current literature varying, depending on context and application. The definition that I have chosen for this study is from Kabat-Zinn (2004, p. 4): 'Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally'. This definition describes succinctly and clearly the moment by moment awareness of whatever we may be experiencing, both internally and externally, as it is happening, without judgement. The practice of mindfulness may include more formal activities such as sitting and walking meditation as well as more informally adopting a mindful approach to everyday activities such as washing the dishes and brushing one's teeth. In both formal and informal mindfulness practices, the breath is commonly used as an 'anchor' to remind the practitioner to gently return the attention to the present moment each time the mind wanders.

The majority of current mindfulness-based approaches for children and adolescents are modified (with shorter sessions) versions of the eight-week Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT) programmes (for details see Burke, 2009). However, in recent years, new courses are being created, piloted and rolled out specifically for adolescents and children as well as teachers, staff and parents (see for example The Mindfulness in Schools Project http://mindfulnessinschools.org/courses/). Current MBAs in educational settings are diverse in content (see mindfulness-based programme descriptions in Meiklejohn et al., 2012), are not always detailed sufficiently in studies and vary in terms of dosage and the theory proposed behind mindfulness-based practices (Harnett & Dawe, 2012).

Background

When I first began to look at the existing literature around mindfulness-based programmes in educational settings at the start of my research in 2011, I was struck by the fast-paced creation of

new mindfulness-based interventions, especially in the US. At the time, studies involving teachers and school staff in mindfulness-based interventions were scarce. It was apparent that mindfulness-based interventions were being created and implemented from a top-down or external approach using outside agencies to deliver MBAs rather than training existing school staff in mindfulness and encouraging them to have their own mindfulness practice, a bottom-up approach.

In the face of this strong current pushing mindfulness-based interventions forward, I thought it prudent to investigate what type of mindfulness-based activities were already being practised (or not) in schools at the present time. To my knowledge, no other survey tool has been created to gather such data.

Mindfulness in Schools Questionnaire (MiSQ)

The first phase of my research involved creating the *Mindfulness in Schools Questionnaire* (MiSQ). The principal aim of the questionnaire was to find out what, if any, mindfulness-based activities were taking place in educational establishments in the region and how these were being taught, practised and engaged with. I was also interested to know if there were any particular reasons why mindfulness-based activities were not taking place in some schools. The MiSQ is a 22-item qualitative online questionnaire consisting of five sections that contain items about type of school/college, details of any mindfulness-based activities engaged in, feedback that may have been received about these activities and general comments including how respondents think mindfulness is perceived within education. At the end of the survey, in a separate section, participants are offered the opportunity to take part in a follow-up focus group about mindfulness in education; these focus groups were conducted during the second phase of the study. The definition of mindfulness-based activities incorporated in the MiSQ is an adaptation of Jon Kabat-Zinn's definition (2004, p.4). Details were added to the definition to make it more relevant to school settings and to be inclusive of those in the school environment: 'Mindfulness activities in schools are those in which pupils/students, school staff and parents can increase awareness of themselves and others through paying attention, in a non-judgmental way, in the present moment'. A number of examples of mindfulness-based activities were given with the definition that included yoga, martial arts and loving-kindness meditation.

The MiSQ was sent out electronically via SurveyMonkey to nursery, primary and secondary schools and colleges in the Northamptonshire, Milton Keynes and Bedfordshire areas. This region was chosen as the study is funded by The University of Northampton, which has strong links with the local community. Invitation emails, which included an individual embedded web link to the questionnaire, were addressed to named contacts. Email addresses and contact names were obtained using school directories and websites available publicly online. If there was no response within a fortnight from an email address, then a reminder email was sent, with a final follow-up email again a week later. Student teachers at The University of Northampton also completed paper versions of the MiSQ.

Are mindfulness-based activities already taking place in schools?

The data described here from the online version of the MiSQ, are from nursery, primary and secondary schools as there were no responses from colleges in the region. An equal number of primary and secondary schools responded. 46.4% of respondents stated that mindfulness-based

activities were taking place in their schools, 35.7% responded that they were not taking place and 17.9% were unsure if mindfulness-based activities were taking place or not in their schools. These data suggest that activities that involve a mindful approach are currently taking place in schools in the region. The following comment from a MiSQ respondent supports this interpretation.

'I think many activities that are linked to 'min[d]fulness' take part across a school day but not in a structured way. The more structured activities are useful but require trained staff and cut into teaching time which is not always helpful'. ([d] added by author)

This comment indicates that current activities engaged with in schools are not necessarily labelled as mindfulness-based activities. This could be because the word mindfulness has only recently been introduced to education in terms of MBAs and that such activities are already known by a different name. The respondent also raises important points about how mindfulness-based activities can be incorporated into the existing curriculum with minimum disruption to class time and how trained members of staff are required to teach mindfulness practices.

Respondents who were unsure as to whether or not mindfulness-based activities were taking place in their schools may not have aligned current activities with the definition provided in the MiSQ and/or may not have wanted to label them as such, if mindfulness is a new term to them and they were concerned not to misrepresent their school or themselves in any way. It could also be the case that respondents are not fully aware of all of the activities that their colleagues engage in, as teachers may be discreet about any such mindfulness-based activities in case they are not encouraged in their school.

Examples of mindfulness-based activities from the MiSQ

The wide range of mindfulness-based activities cited in the *Mindfulness in Schools Questionnaire* was an interesting and crucial discovery in the first phase of my research. The spectrum of mindfulness-based activities cited in the questionnaire ranged from activities such as yoga, martial arts and meditation, to relaxation and massage, to working with bereavement.

The most frequently cited mindfulness-based activity in the MiSQ was yoga. This was one of the examples of a mindfulness-based activity given in the MiSQ. This was followed in order of frequency by relaxation and music (both with the same number of responses) and silent reflection and meditation (also with the same number of responses). Massage was a less frequently cited activity. Activities such as relaxation and massage are not mindfulness practices, although relaxation can be an outcome of mindfulness practice. Relaxation and massage are offered in classes and products by Relax Kids (http://www.relaxkids.com/about/), one of the Universal Programmes included in the Northamptonshire Shoebox, a collection of resources for the Targeted Mental Health in Schools Programme (TaMHS) in Northamptonshire (see Fardon, 2012). Brain Gym, also cited in the MiSQ, and not a mindfulness practice, may produce, according to the Brain Gym website, (http://www.braingym.org/about), improvements in areas such as academic skills, concentration and memory. It could be the case that school staff that cited these activities in the MiSQ, thought that the possible outcomes from such activities matched the possible benefits of mindfulness-based activities, especially with the association of brain and mind. Inclusion of activities such as relaxation and massage, highlight the possible areas of confusion surrounding the definition of a mindfulness-based activity.

Another mindfulness-based activity cited by MiSQ respondents was working with bereavement, a Targeted or Support-Wave 2 focused programme as part of the Northamptonshire TaMHS programme. Interestingly, from a Buddhist perspective, mindfulness of death is considered as a type of mindfulness in the Pali suttas (Buddhist texts written in Pali language) as well as recollection of the Buddha, contemplation of the repulsiveness of the body and meditation on loving kindness or metta (Bodhi, 2011). Although working with bereavement may not spring to mind as a mindfulness-based activity in schools, it is curious to see that a connection has been made with awareness of death. This could be considered a tenuous link depending on the level of inquiry engaged in and the intention behind the activity nevertheless it warrants further investigation.

Langer (1997, p.4) points out that, 'A mindful approach to any activity has three characteristics: the continuous creation of new categories; openness to new information; and an implicit awareness of more than one perspective'. In this sense, it is not so much the activity itself that is the focus, but the intention behind the activity. The activity itself cannot be mindful although certain activities such as yoga and martial arts do lend themselves more to a mind-body focus. Hanh (2008) in 'The Miracle of Mindfulness' includes a chapter entitled 'Exercises in Mindfulness' with everyday activities such as washing the dishes, making tea, cleaning the house and taking a long bath as well as following your breath while listening to music. Towards the end of the chapter, exercises with a deeper level of exploration such as 'Your Skeleton' and 'A loved one who has died' are also mentioned. We return here again to mindfulness of death. From Hanh's (2008) examples, it is clear that mindfulness-based activities can cover a wide range of practices from those that take place on an everyday basis to those with a deeper level of inquiry.

Summary

The array of responses provided in the *Mindfulness in Schools Questionnaire* illustrates the possible ambiguity in defining mindfulness-based activities. Having said this, this obscurity could provide schools with the opportunity to be flexible and curious about incorporating a mindful approach to learning and teaching. Clearly defining mindfulness and mindfulness-based activities in a secular context, such as in schools, is particularly important in order to provide information about the possible benefits of mindfulness-based activities and to state what the purpose of engaging in these mindfulness practices is, as well as to rigorously measure the effects of mindfulness-based interventions. However, with such a reductionist and measured approach, comes the risk of losing the essence of the Buddhist constructs of mindfulness (Grossman & Van Dam, 2011). It is essential to bear in mind that there are great subtleties of meaning and inquiry within the practice of mindfulness that are not necessarily attended to, or fully appreciated by, operationalised definitions of mindfulness and the secularisation of mindfulness practice. For example, the original Buddhist intention of practising mindfulness is to achieve enlightenment. This is an important point with regards to schools examining their own understanding of MBAs in terms of values, ethos and intention.

It is vital that present practice in terms of the curriculum and the current political climate (Jennings, 2013) are taken into account when incorporating mindfulness-based interventions in schools. Making sure that these programmes are age, culturally and developmentally appropriate for children and adolescents is also important (Davidson et al., 2012).

The *Mindfulness in Schools Questionnaire* provides an original starting point from which to survey the feasibility and efficacy of existing mindfulness-based activities or interventions in schools. The MiSQ offers staff the opportunity to express their views on mindfulness in education and any interest that they may have in learning more about mindfulness. These data are all important for the sustainable future of mindfulness in schools as it is these staff members who may go on to teach mindfulness in schools and practice mindfulness themselves.

Correspondence

Jacqueline Stone

Email: Jacqueline.Stone@northampton.ac.uk

Psychology Division

The University of Northampton

References

Bodhi, B. (2011). What does mindfulness really mean? A canonical perspective. *Contemporary Buddhism*, 12(1), 19-39.

Brain Gym. **Retrieved November 13, 2013, from** http://www.braingym.org/about

Burke, C.A. (2009). Mindfulness-based approaches with children and adolescents: A preliminary review of current research in an emergent field. *Journal of Child and Family Studies*. DOI: 10.1007/s10826-009-9282-x

Davidson, R.J., Dunne, J., Eccles, J.S., Engle, A., Greenberg, M., Jennings, P., Jha, A., Jinpa, T., Lantieri, L., Meyer, D., Roeser, R.W., & Vago, D. (2012). Contemplative practices and mental training: Prospects for American education. *Child Development Perspectives*, *6*(2), 146-153.

Fardon, J. (Ed.) (2012). The Northamptonshire shoebox second edition 2012: A resource to support the inclusion of pupils, where there are concerns about their social, behavioural, mental or emotional health. **Retrieved November 13, 2013, from** http://www.northamptonshire.gov.uk/en/councilservices/EducationandLearning/sen/shoebox/Pages/default.aspx

Grossman, P., & Van Dam, N.T. (2011). Mindfulness, by any other name…: Trials and tribulations of *sati* in Western psychology and science. *Contemporary Buddhism*, *12*(1), 219-239.

Hanh, T.N. (2008). *The miracle of mindfulness*. Reading: Rider.

Harnett, P.H., & Dawe, S. (2012). Review: The contribution of mindfulness-based therapies for children and families and proposed conceptual integration. *Child and Adolescent Mental Health*. DOI: 10.1111/j.1475-3588.2011.00643.x

Jennings, P. (2013). Five things that need to happen to bring mindfulness into education. **Retrieved November 13, 2013, from** http://www.mindful.org/the-mindful-society/5-things-that-need-to-happen-to-integrate-mindfulness-in-education

Kabat-Zinn, J. (2004). *Wherever you go, there you are*. London: Piatkus.

Langer, E.J. (1997). *The power of mindful learning*. Cambridge, MA: Da Capo Press.

Meiklejohn, J., Phillips, C., Freedman, M.L., Griffin, M.L., Biegel, G., Roach, A., Frank, J., Burke, C., Pinger, L., Soloway, G., Isberg, R., Sibinga, E. Grossman, L., & Saltzman, A. (2012). Integrating Mindfulness Training into K-12 education: Fostering the resilience of teachers and students. *Mindfulness*. DOI: 10.1007/s12671-012-0094-5

Relax Kids. **Retrieved November 13, 2013, from** http://www.relaxkids.com/about/

Schoeberlein, D., & Sheth, S. (2009). *Mindfulness teaching and teaching mindfulness: A guide for anyone who teaches anything*. Somerville,MA: Wisdom Publications.

The Mindfulness in Schools Project. **Retrieved November 14, 2013, from** http://mindfulnessinschools.org/courses/