

## Mindfulness in Schools for Social Emotional Wellbeing of Students

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Mindfulness, Health care, Students.

### Defining Mindfulness

Now a days, mindfulness is talked about in every health care profession wherein primary health care medical doctor, psychologist, psychiatrist, occupational worker is incorporating mindfulness as an integral tool along with their therapeutic modalities. Hospitals, clinics, corporates, prisons, public schools etc everywhere Mindfulness Based Interventions (MBI's) are incorporated [1]. There is no one conclusive reason for it but maybe because mindfulness supports human needs of connection and compassion in a non-religious manner that makes it approachable to all [2].

Mindfulness is understood as a practice of being fully aware of one's feelings and sensations without fixation on thoughts of the past or the future. We all have awareness but as we progress in life this awareness is clouded in favour of thinking. As we notice around us, multitasking has become the modern-day vice. We are watching a movie and texting our friends; we are driving and planning the dinner menu and listening to music; or reading a book and thinking about our next holiday etc. There is research to suggest that we only attend to 50% of what is in front of us [3]. Our minds wonder and our attention continuously fluctuates. We fluctuate between past, present and future. By applying mindfulness practices into our daily living, the focus on present can be increased.

Though the mindfulness has been spoken/mandated in many religions and philosophy since many years, it has come into being only in last 30 years as a study and scientific practice [4]. In last few years, many in various ways with almost similar premise define mindfulness. "Meditation especially mindful meditation is aligning one's heart and mind inwardly towards awareness of the present moment" [5]. "Mindfulness is to cultivate embodiment,

attention, heartfulness and interconnection" [4]. Among so many definitions of mindfulness another one that resonates with others is "3 A's: Aware, Advancing, Authentic" - "Being aware of self, of others and of senses and context, advancing involves resilience building and adaptability and finally authenticity is acceptance of self and others without any judgement" [6]. "Practicing mindfulness is to attend to all five senses- see, hear, feel, smell, and taste. A mindful person notices the feeling of clothing against her skin, the air going in and out of her nostrils, and the sounds and smells in a room. Its synonymous with noticing one's emotions and thinking without judging" [7]. Is mindfulness an invention? It's not! Children are "mindful" by nature. A new-born child gazes at every new thing with amazement and with mindful attention. With growing experiences, mundaneness sets in and kids start losing the sense of amazement. Then we require practices and techniques to bring back the state of awareness.

There is lots of research to suggest that practice of mindfulness is benefitting adults in stress reduction, fighting depression and anxiety, emotional control and increasing overall quality of life [8]. If the power of mindfulness is so strong so why not start its practice during early school life and have young minds benefit from it. This essay is aimed at studying and understanding the need and usefulness of mindfulness in school context.

### Barriers to Schools

It could be said that achieving high academic results and maintain good mental health are the two goals of schools. In addition, the third is character building and resilience termed as global citizenship for development of moral and civic virtues for societal wellbeing. School policies aim at producing productive members of society with well-developed sense of self, others and society [9].

A child needs sound emotional environment for emotional and physical growth and for academic and worldly success and

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unfortunately, now a day's children are being effected by the sociological changes around. There is less time for playing with others, and learning how to develop social skills and friendships and increased influence of television, competitive and stressful computer games, disruptive fairy lifestyles, and diminished parental influence [10]. The most common problems faced by children are attention issues, managing emotions, stress, fears, bodily pains, anxiety, depression, building resilience, substance abuse and social relationships. Anxiety and depression being the highest [11].

“Overlooked or ignored in the current atmosphere is the domain of interiority- of the inner life of the growing learner-and how it can and needs to be recognized, attended to, nurtured, and developed in concert with all the outer knowledge and competencies so that each child learns how to be at home in his or her skin, how to calm his or her own mind and body, and how to cultivate self-awareness, emotional intelligence, confidence, and resilience in the face of stress of all kinds and pressures to perform, to be certain way, to fit in” [4]. Since stress and anxiety can be life threatening, it is important for us to teach our young children how to manage anxiety just as we teach them academic excellence in schools.

### **Mindfulness Research in Schools**

Mental health issues can inhibit academic and overall development of children. Given that, children spend so much time in schools, this is an ideal environment to diagnose issues and provide help.

Following are few conclusive school- based mindfulness research findings-

- In schools mindfulness can be helpful in enhancing compliance and emotional regulation [12].
- By practicing mindfulness children can achieve improved emotional and behavioural self- regulation and enhanced tolerance to frustration and better self -control [13].
- If adolescents do meditation practice for 10-20 mins a day, its equivalent to adult meditation practice of twenty minutes [13].
- Mostly all school settings- public, private and alternate benefit from mindfulness practices [13].
- More attention, better concentration and less anxiety was reported by adolescents after mindfulness training [14].
- Mindfulness is found to be conducive to lower anxiety and improve social skills among students with learning disabilities [14].
- Students with ADHD can be helped via mindfulness to learn to pay attention [14].

A review of the school based mindfulness interventions has concluded: “The benefits of meditation interventions for adolescents include improved cognitive functioning; increased self-esteem; improvements in emotional self- regulation, self-control, and emotional intelligence; increased feelings of well-being; reductions in behavioural problems; decreased anxiety; decrease in blood pressure and heart rate; improvements in sleep behaviour; increased internal locus of control; and improved

school climate” [13]. Equipped with these traits, students can be self-reliant to take on pressures of academics, emotional and social life.

### **Literature Review and History**

Mindfulness is derived from traditions. Meditation is the basic premise of mindfulness and in the realm of religion meditation has always been practiced for thousands of years. It has been part of Buddhism text for more than 2500 years. It was reserved for Asian Buddhists monks prior to 19th century and was probably on the verge of dying out till was revived by westerners who transmitted the interest in meditation to Europe and America and set up Insight Meditation Society and Spirit Rock Meditation centre in the USA [1]. It was here that meditation was taken up as a secular act of chanting and calming one- self. One of the students in IMS was Jon Kabat-Zinn. After attending its retreat in 1979 Jon Kabat-Zinn, a biomedical scientist of university of Massachusetts medical school became a pioneer of mindful research. He came up with MBSR program (mindfulness-based stress reduction), to help adults deal with stress and chronic pain; by process of paying attention in the present moment, non-judgementally by nurturing awareness and loving oneself [4].

The focus on present moment awareness can abate the fight or flight reaction during stressful moment and hence reduce anxiety [15]. In 1980's while lecturing around, Jon Kabat-Zinn started connecting Buddhism meditation to psychology and begin to call it secular and so it's only since last three decades that mindfulness has evolved and has come out of religious traditions and has become part of science and psychology.

### **Science of Mindfulness**

Neuroscience and developmental psychology have helped to understand and integrate the benefits of mindfulness. Currently it's the focus of research in and application in more than 250 medical centres around the world [3]. Brain mapping research clearly shows the benefit of mindfulness, which can be noted altering brain processes via MRI, EEG etc. These can tell us what is going on inside our brains and self-report and observation and interviews can tell us about people's experience with mindfulness [16]. It is seen that amygdala- a part of brain that is activated to emotions like fear is less reactive to fear following mindfulness training, hippocampus-the part of brain responsible for learning and memory is more active after mindfulness and the prefrontal cortex- a part of brain regulating maturity, emotions and behaviours and making wise decisions is more active after mindfulness training.

### **Practice of Mindfulness in Schools**

Its 8.30 am morning in an international high school in Hong Kong. As soon as the bell rings all students in a group of 15-20 sit down on in a circle in their classroom. They know that they need to stay eye closed and silent for 3-5 minutes. Minds wonder, eyes open, giggles are heard but students are seen to be bringing themselves back to the quiet mode. This is followed by 10 minutes of guided session by a teacher involving – close your eyes and visualize a kind act, think of any two good traits about yourself,

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compliment the person next to you, trace your fingers, stretch with yoga movements and feel every move, breathe through your stomach and feel our breathing etc. This is the school's newly integrated mindfulness program in their student wellbeing- SEL (social emotional learning) a part of PSHE (physical social health and education) curriculum. Children know that these techniques are to increase their mindfulness; their focus; their awareness in present. The goal is to cultivate mindfulness by repetitive rituals in everyday life. Students have reported – going off to sleep, feeling calmer, relaxed, happier. Overall its productive and well accepted among students, teachers and parents!!

Mindful students would be walking feeling their feet hitting the ground, their bags weight on their shoulder, feeling the brush of air against their nostrils instead of planning a party or thinking about the weekend movie date with friends [17]. This brings an enhanced self-awareness that helps in decreasing vulnerability and emotional reactivity and enhances academic success. Social emotional learning (SEL) and wellbeing of students is being practiced in schools worldwide today and they are being viewed as safe guarding society [18]. Being intertwined with SEL, mindfulness carries an agenda of developing caring and nurturing schools. In schools, MBP's (mindfulness based programs) are envisioned as a universal intervention appropriate for school children of all age groups [19] and have been introduced in schools at all levels. There has been considerable increase in inclusion of mindfulness interventions to support student mental health in classrooms [20]. Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) suggested by Jon Kabath-Zinn in clinical settings can be transported to school-based mindfulness programs in which repeatedly engaging in meditation few times a day brings a state of awareness where we are aware of present moment with acceptance. This helps to reduce stress [21]. In addition, Mindfulness based cognitive therapy (MBCT) developed by psychologist Zindel Segal and his colleagues at the University of Toronto, which is modelled after MBSR, emphasizes the idea that the negative thoughts that can spark a depressive episode are fleeting mental events [3]. Therefore, clients have the power to choose them or ignore them. This technique can very powerfully used with young adults to cope with negative thoughts.

Mindfulness training in school have incorporated many different types of interventions. Teachers in schools are sent for training to help students with mindfulness, which helps both staff and students at the same time to attain emotional growth. In certain school's mindfulness experts- researchers, graduate students, mindful trainers are called [20]. Mindfulness is practiced via meditation and is cultivated via various practices involving all bodily senses. It involve selecting a point of focus, such as the breath, or a physical action such as raising and lowering arms, and regulating and directing attention to that point with sustained focused attention [22]. The common practices or techniques or interventions that are used during mindfulness in schools are- yoga- bodily movements, mindfulness based psychological interventions, traditional meditation training [23]. Mindfulness training is like a mental training in which individuals exercise to cultivate attentive, present centred, and non-reactive mental

state [24]. These practices have an aim to relieve students of stress, focus attention, promote social and emotional learning and cultivate character traits like compassion, kindness and generosity.

Last few years there have been many mindfulness based psychological interventions that have been introduced in various schools and have found to be very useful. Few of these are discussed here. Mind-UP- this program was introduced by scholastic books in 2011 and it introduced mindfulness to 6 million children in 12 countries. In this program, mindfulness is taught as a neuroscience practice, encompassing techniques that can change the brain. Children are supported to “practice focus breathing” 2-3 times daily. When the mind wanders, they are asked to bring attention back to their breath. During this practice, children develop non-judgemental focus and repetition create and strengthen neuron connections. This also helps children to “regulate their emotions, “attune to their inner voice”, “become more compassionate”, and exhibit more empathy” [19]. Mindful journaling – art / nature/writing journal – journal keeping is a great inspiration for creativity, catharsis, stress reduction etc. it can be added with doodling, artwork. It helps the writer to form a relationship with his/her thought process and promote reflection. Each student can create one as per their style and be in present moment [6]. Mindful walk and mindful selfies are also few that have been practiced and found to be very useful. Few other mindful tried and tested techniques in schools now a days are start small and start now as a small exercise of asking students what they heard last, monitor breathing for 30 seconds and gradually increase it to one minute; everyday routines- welcoming students with a smile, start with a poetry or a quote, end the class with appreciation etc help engage students in embracing each day with mindful moments [6]. Staff teachers should be mindful together by mindful breathing, yoga, walking, sharing/listening, grateful heart, building solidarity; teach students to find/enjoy simple pleasures- the moments that help one to feel whole and connected; playing with dogs, eating chocolate, listening to music, photographing, poetry, looking up and looking out; building mindful spaces for self-appreciation and gratitude; humour, laughter, expressive writing and mindful eating [21].

### Recommendations

In today's education, system there is a need to look at a student as a whole person. Social emotional learning (SEL) programs in schools support students in developing five major social emotional competences- self-management, self-awareness, social awareness, relationship skills and responsible decision making [4]. The research and the study carried out in this paper suggest that the mindfulness has important role to play in future of education, its practices in school helps students to cultivate the above competencies, and there is need for integration of SEL and mindfulness in schools.

Children and young adults have needs of connection with society, meaningful life goals, self-awareness etc. Understandably, if these needs are fulfilled at a school level it can make our young ones' lives more productive. Life course health developmental model (LCHD) offers that social, psychological and environmental

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factors operating early in life could have major impacts on both short- and long-term health outcomes [25]. Health and wellness can be well understood via integrative Bio-psycho-social-spiritual (I-BMS) model in schools for integration of holistic health. As proposed by Sulmasy in 2002, this model supports healing when there is wholeness, connectedness, purpose and meaning in one's life. Meditation is the core of mind, body, spirit care and it brings self-awareness and inner strength. Eastern healthcare is healing and emotional regulation via practices like qi gong- flow of energy, Daoism- go with the flow, Confucius- connectedness with society and family and Buddhism- meditate [26]. Western healthcare model proposes mindful breathing as an integral part of mind body medicine. It was proposed by Herbert Benson MD with visualization and imagery techniques for relaxation. Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) in western medical world is based upon mindful meditation. In realm of mindfulness in schools, eastern and western paradigms are interdependent and are partners in helping. In behavioural health integration- residency behavioural science education model is where a teacher is a behavioural health clinician in schools for educational purposes. This teacher proposes social learning programs like mindfulness for emotional wellbeing of students .It derives its basics from PCBH- primary care behavioural health model [26].

### Critical Review

There has been lots of study and research and findings in this area and the initial research findings suggest that mindfulness is very effective in fostering positive development in young adolescents but the research field is still young and we are just beginning to learn how mindfulness promotes social emotional learning in schools [27]. There are few other suggestions, recommendations, and challenges to be taken care of in mindful school setting. All mindfulness based program teachers need support, training, and awareness building to enable them to more skilfully work in inclusive ways across the demographics of society [2]. There is a challenge for teachers' readiness to teach and support i.e. teachers teaching mindfulness need to be mindful themselves. To use mindfulness in classroom, teachers and administrators should first learn and train themselves in it [21]. Once they are in tune with their inner self only then they can teach mindfulness to their students. Meditation was not meant for every-one, it was meant for enlightened minds. So it shouldn't be assumed that mindfulness whose basic premise is meditative focus of mind can be practiced/ learnt by everyone [28]. Few other challenges can be -reluctant minds cannot learn mindfulness; it's important to build student-teacher trust relationship, mindfulness based programs need to be tailor-made for students of various needs – physical and sensory disabilities, learning, emotional, behavioral and mental health difficulties and some trauma related conditions. If not practiced with sensitivity and understanding, mindfulness practice can be over whelming. There are very few mental health professionals working in schools. So need of the hour is the multidisciplinary professionals to work with children to practice mindfulness [11]. In addition, there is ethics and moral dilemma while practicing mindfulness in schools. Since its roots are from Buddhism religion, it's to be kept in mind by health care and mental health professionals

to not be impose moral frame work or religious beliefs on their clients or students [1]. The aim of mindfulness is to help clients/ students explore their own ethics and behave in congruence with their nature and present moment. Another factor to keep in mind is time restraint in schools. Teachers find it a constraint to find time to squeeze time in for mindful teaching amidst curriculum [29].

### Conclusion

Childhood is a vulnerable and an important phase in an individual's life. Children have needs to be connected and feel part of the society and findings from this study indicate that mindfulness enhances feelings of connectedness. There is a lot of research that says that individuals who have issues in their early life tend to have more serious problems in later in life. School counselling and well-being programs via prevention and development seek reduction in the incidence of harmful behaviours and embracement of healthy lifestyles in adult life [9]. As discussed in this paper via various research that mindfulness shows great promise for young children.

Mindfulness in schools is about developing a new learning environment. A safe school, where every student feels empowered for self-expression. Students and teachers thrive in this safe environment learning. Mindfulness aim at making our students "wholesome". Students who want to boost their performance, and parents, teachers or caregivers wishing to be more attentive to others' needs may all find mindfulness training useful [3].

As put succinctly by Jon-Kabat Zinn, in this exponentially accelerating era for our peace of mind, satisfying and effective life meditative awareness is important [30]. Our society is going through an evolving integration between old and contemporary knowledge about the conditions needed to support the human mind-body system to evolve and to skilfully work with distress. Mindfulness arose from eastern paradigms meditation, yoga and regulation of emotions and today finds its place in developmental psychology and neuroscience. It is increasingly becoming an important part of western model of body-mind healing science. Its integration in I-BMS model of behaviour health is well grounded. Conclusive research is pointing in the direction that mindfulness is very effective in helping our schoolchildren deal with stress and attaining new skills. For schools based mindful program to be successful there is need that mindfulness becomes a way of everyday school life; every child's self-being. With a promise of continuing and ongoing research in this field all educators/school systems should embrace mindfulness with due sensitivity and understanding and caution.

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