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Integrating Mindfulness into School Classrooms

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Abstract

This senior capstone research project examines how mindfulness could be integrated into the school classrooms through the use of literature review, interviews with elementary school teachers in the Monterey Bay area and surveys with several students along with one subject participant at the California State University Monterey Bay. As a result, the findings reveal that most students and teachers thought that mindfulness proved to be successful and useful when integrating it with the younger population to deal with their emotions.

Introduction and Background

At last, I come to close another chapter of my life. I am from the local area and graduated high school in 2009. I went to our local community college where I went to school because I was advised too. My love for music was strong so, I focused on making a career that would engage my interest for music. But as I was passing on my third year, I noticed how easily distracted I became with life. I started driving, which made traveling more accessible. Although to travel, I needed to work, so I began working multiple jobs at a time. Before I knew it, school wasn't the priority anymore. Life had taken over and I got caught up in the tangles.

It was frustrating. I had no sense of direction, I was just stale. I wasn't in control of anything. Finally, I began thinking about school and after several missed deadlines, I applied here at CSUMB in fall of 2014. But soon again, another setback struck and I was distracted in achieving my main goal. I ended up failing my first semester here. It took about another couple of years, but eventually, I prevailed. I was to start a new journey in fall of 2017.

My inspiration for coming back to school was through the love of my at the time boyfriends children. His son was 5 and his daughter 2. They were both at an age of exploration and I wanted to learn with them. That was when I knew along, I was meant to teach the youth. I put in place strict rules about only having one job while I was in school. I knew that if I had anymore on my plate I might go back downhill.

I have been working extremely hard to make my dreams come true. I've learned of Mindfulness throughout my education at Cal State University, Monterey Bay (CSUMB). Whilst doing my service learning here at CSUMB, I have seen it inside the classrooms at an elementary

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school in the Monterey Peninsula School District (MPUSD). According to (Bohn, 2013),

“Mindfulness is a growing trend in mental health practice and the process is one that is showing promise with children”. I am interested in bringing Mindfulness into school classrooms.

Mindfulness is an innovative way of bringing self-awareness to the beholder. I am intrigued how Mindfulness can be used as an alternative method of teaching students to cope with their academic and other lively stresses. As a student myself, I have experienced many troubles and woes of what life can put one through, while being a full-time student. If mindfulness is introduced, how will it affect one’s association with stress?

In this study, my primary question to answer is *why should Mindfulness be integrated into Elementary school classrooms?* The following are my secondary questions. They are, *what does research say about the importance of integrating mindfulness into the elementary school classrooms? In another words, what are the advantages and disadvantages of using mindfulness into the classrooms? How has the concept of mindfulness been implemented in the school classrooms? What and when are the appropriate grade level that it has been successful? Are there any schools in the Monterey Bay area that have implemented the concept of mindfulness in the classrooms for their students? If yes, how do teachers integrate it into their classrooms and what were the results? And lastly, if the concept of mindfulness is successful in the classrooms, what resources are needed to bring about integrating mindfulness to educators who want to implement it in their classrooms?* These questions came about because teachers need a wide set variety of resources to teach their students. If there is any proof that Mindfulness can support students academically and emotionally, then it should be offered as training.

This research is geared towards future educators in pursuing an environment where children will learn how to cope with their feelings and emotions through the practice of

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Mindfulness. Teachers should be open to any new strategies that may instruct their students to a better and healthier life. Mindfulness is a new and upcoming trend and its popularity is only growing.

Literature Review

Moving on from the proposed questions, this next section will examine my formal literature research. Through a collection of articles, online surveys with teachers and students, I will provide what Mindfulness is, why it is important, and how it can be integrated into the school classroom.

In life, there are many occasions when one might feel overwhelmed. The deadline for submitting work at a business, the financial stresses of making ends meet, or even the working student that is struggling to find time for homework. Regardless who may be experiencing these hardships, one thing is clear. Everyone has their own troubles they lead in their life. There are studies that have shown that the practice of Mindfulness has reduced stress (Bohn, 2013).

Mindfulness is a practice that has evolved from teachings of the Eastern World, specifically of Buddhist traditions. Mindfulness is described as a form of mental training (Fossas, 2015). The practice of Mindfulness is usually taught separate from the idea of religion. This does not mean that the religion cannot be further investigated, but rather it is highly suggested. Psychologist Johnathan Haidt (2013), mentions how the Dhammapada is one of the greatest psychological works ever written. The collection of Buddha's teachings gives the reader insight into how the consciousness works and the race to strive and how it is never satisfied (Fossas, 2015). People often turn to the teachings during times of trouble, disappointment, and when

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everything around takes over. Mindfulness, is similar in use because it uses the concentration of the breath of the body to bring focus to how one is feeling.

In the 1970²s, Kabat-Zinn developed an eight-week program named *Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction* (MSBR). The program was inspired by Vipassana, which is a Buddhist meditation practice that loosely translate to English as, “clear awareness or “insight” (Fossas, 2015). The four foundations of Buddhism are 1. The Body, 2. Sensations or Feelings, 3. The mind / consciousness, and 4. Mental Contents. In relation to the first foundation, breathing is a part of the body and is regularly used for the practice of Mindfulness (Fossas, 2015). The focus of Mindfulness is becoming aware of how one is feeling in the present moment. It then further develops into a cognitive thought of why one is feeling and becomes a solution to how one can stop a negative thought or action from progressing. Kabat-Zinn see’s Mindfulness as paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally (Fossas, 2015).

Mindfulness is a great tactic that anyone can take in helping themselves settle the stresses of life. But when should Mindfulness be introduced? Ackerman (2019) shows that when mindfulness is practiced in the classroom, it is successful for many students. Mindfulness does not only help students, but staff as well, too manage their own stresses more efficiently (Ackerman, 2019). Baxter (N,D.) has found that mindfulness also improves the reduction of stress and anxiety in children. The practice of Mindfulness encourages them to find peace which helps them establish a stable state of mind. Mindfulness practiced regularly, can lead to improvements in their emotional struggles as well as their academia (Bloom et al, 2017). A considerable amount of research has proven that Mindfulness in the classroom benefits all those included (Bishop et al, 2004).

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Further research (Bishop et al, 2004) has led to how Mindfulness benefits the general classrooms, low socio-economic areas, and shows an improvement in behavioral challenged students. Mindfulness has promise as an approach for helping individuals deal with emotional distress and maladaptive behavior. Students show more resilience against distractions after practicing Mindfulness. They are able to show the success of mindfulness through their social interactions and academic work. A special education supervisor sees the differences in her students for the Lancaster, PA. city schools. Clancy would lose teachers because the students were out of control (Garey, 2019). Wynne Kinder, a lead instructor for the mindfulness program, “Wellness Works in Schools,” introduced Mindfulness to a middle school in Lancaster, PA and showed a significant amount of gains in self-regulation. Randy Fernando of Mindful Schools, in Oakland, CA is a program that brings Mindfulness to the grades K-5. These are mostly low income-based schools, but what he has noticed, is that it helps the students and teachers. These students struggle outside the classroom with other worldly problems. During these times in the classroom, it is the first time that students have felt at peace (Garey, 2019).

Below is a chart of the popularity of Mindfulness over the years. The topic is becoming a popular method and should be translated as a huge success in helping society. As the topic increases, the use of Mindfulness in schools has become a popular practice world-wide. This tool is recognized for its improvements in stress management. The earlier that Mindfulness is introduced, the better this method can be retained throughout the teenage years to adulthood (Garey, 2019).

Winter (2016) indicated that, in the United States alone, 19.1% of a population of 47.6 million adults, have experienced mental illnesses which represents about 1 in 5 or 16.5% of the U.S. youth’s population between 6-17, has experienced a mental health disorder (2019). Please

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refer to Appendix 4. That averages to be about 7.7 million people. The rate between adults and the youth are astonishing. The talk of mental health has a been taboo for far too long.

Mindfulness is no cure for mental health issues but can be used as a step forward in addressing all those who suffer under any mental health disorders.

Methods and Procedures

In order to further extend my research, I would need to reach out into the community to investigate the concept of implementation of Mindfulness in action. First, I found a Mindfulness instructor here at the University. Her name will remain anonymous, or as Instructor A (See Appendix 1). I then connected with a local Elementary School where both teachers and students were surveyed after a short introductory activity on Mindfulness lesson plan that took place. The teacher surveys will be under Appendix 2 and as for student surveys, under Appendix 3. The ultimate goal for these surveys is to find out whether Mindfulness is being implemented in the classroom or not, whether or not the practice of mindfulness was successful or not, and to see if any re-occurring positives or negatives were apparent for all participants.

For the instructor, the first question, what is mindfulness to you, purpose was to find out what they thought about mindfulness. I wanted to gage where their inspiration was drawn from. The second question, how is it introduced to your class? Then, it is followed how Mindfulness is interjected in the day. The third question, how often is it used in the classroom? That is concluded on how often mindfulness is offered or available for practice. The fourth question, do you see any positive or negative outcomes from your students? That was to find any strengths or weaknesses that Mindfulness could produce through the students. And lastly, this question, do

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students reach out and thank you for your implementation of Mindfulness? That was to find out if the popularity of Mindfulness spoke for its success rates.

For the Teachers, the first question, when first introduced, did you find Mindfulness helpful? That was to obtain their level of knowledge of Mindfulness. I then further pressed on finding out what their initial thoughts or opinions were on Mindfulness were. The second question, do you use Mindfulness inside and outside the classroom? That was to see if there were any regular practices of mindfulness that were being used in the classroom. And third question being, is there a difference in behaviors or attitudes within the children? That was to determine whether there were any noticeable short-term or long-term changes within the students that were recognizable.

The first question listed for the children's survey was, did you like the Mindfulness activity? This was to simply find out if there was any enjoyment for them when they participated in the Mindfulness activity. The second question, did you find it helpful, was to see if they could process or understand the process of Mindfulness. The last question, how likely are you to continue to use mindfulness outside school? That was to measure their interest for Mindfulness. I wanted to see if the activity sparked an interest for students to continue the instruction of Mindfulness.

Results and Findings

After collecting the completed surveys, I was able to synthesize the information. The Mindfulness Instructor was very positive that her work was making a difference. She has been certified under the program KORU. This provides a specific curriculum of teaching mindfulness to college students and young adults. Greeson et. al (2015) states that the primary emphasis in

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emerging adulthood is on identity exploration. This life stage is associated with frequent changes and uncertainty in all life spheres. The KORU program puts a heavy emphasis on this growing stage because of their stresses due to self-identification throughout their emerging adult livelihood. Her meaning of Mindfulness originates back to the original interpretation of Mindfulness by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn himself. She expressed her success during these meetings that the students show immediate results! Especially those who also practice on their own (Instructor Survey, October, 2019). The program is weekly and they meet at the beginning of the week.

I gave surveys to (3) Elementary level teachers in the local area. I will refer to them as the following, Teacher A, Teacher B, and Teacher C. All teachers had heard of Mindfulness and led me to believe that the knowledge is obtainable. Both Teacher B and C recognize the importance of implementing Mindfulness into their classrooms and do so already. They see the results of the children throughout the year after it has been implemented, which leads me to believe that the structure and consistency of mindfulness plays a huge part in a student's success. What was surprising was that out of the two teachers who practiced Mindfulness in the classroom with their students, the integration of Mindfulness stopped there. Neither Teacher B, or Teacher C instilled the practice in their own daily lives.

As for the children participants, Teachers A, B and C, all practiced a weekly Mindfulness exercise. Afterwards, they given a short survey to answer. Out of the 35 students, 25 said they enjoyed the activity whereas, the other 10 students it was split between a no and an I don't know. Although there was a positive response to enjoying the activity, out the 25 students only 18 said they would do it again. To keep the students engaged it takes practice and knowledge of different methods to incorporate Mindfulness.

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As well as acquiring a synthesis of my surveys, with research I was able to inquire about my proposed questions of research. My first secondary research question is, How has the concept of mindfulness been implemented in school classrooms? Well, according to the many of programs available via online, there is a substantial amount that can be googled and searched. Such as the program KORU, that is in place here at the University. Koru is a Mindful Instructor led based program that target young adults who are transitioning into emerging adults. (Greeson et al, 2014). This is a stage in their life where guidance on the self-identity is lacking. My second question is, what does the research say about the importance of integrating mindfulness into the elementary school classrooms? In other words, what are the advantages and disadvantages of using mindfulness into the classrooms? In (2019), an article listed that kids that participated in a curriculum earned higher marks in performance measures. They also showed greater improvements in areas that promised a future success where those who did not participate show. My third secondary question is, What and when are the appropriate grade level that it has been successful? This was extremely important to me personally, as I am to be a future educator. I wanted to know at what age level or grade level that Mindfulness would be appropriate to teach. As there are programs who focus on using the practice with emerging adults, research also shows that its benefits children through the ages of 4-6. (2019) researched showed enhancement in children's self-regulating skills such as emotional control and the duration of the attention span. With pleasure, I found out there my fourth question, are there any schools in the Monterey Bay area that have implemented the concept of mindfulness in the classrooms for their students? If yes, how do teachers integrate it into their classrooms and what were the results? Teacher B used Mindfulness as a transitioning practice. When they would clean up their desk, whichever table cleaned up the fastest and took a breath would be first to line up for break. This exercise

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can help create a schedule that promotes familiarity with the children. And lastly, the most important question involved for implementing is, if the concept of mindfulness is successful in the classrooms, what resources are needed to bring about integrating mindfulness to educators who want to implement it in their classrooms? This can be answered in various of ways. The resources educators need to implement Mindfulness to the classroom is knowledge. If teaching based instruction is given to instructors to use as a resource for the students this could provide the training educators would need. Once licensed, educators can implement Mindfulness through there own interpretation. From what I saw in my first-hand research, that the Teachers who knew of Mindfulness were not licensed or trained. The internet also has access to many creditable programs such as KORU, and SMART that educators can refer to for.

Discussion

It was very encouraging to know that, as I was writing this research paper, the act of Mindfulness was being seen amongst the children in my local community. I know the act of practicing Mindfulness can be beneficial for students and teachers of all ages. While the practice is still new and developing, Mindfulness should be used by people from all ages. Like any new habit or practice, a scheduled routine should be enforced to implement the cycle of Mindfulness that is used in the daily life. Mindfulness as a concept which is fair enough to understand, but by practices enforces the ideologies. By using it as a small reference in time or switching tasks, this creates a body?? I do not know what you mean here – rephrase this with children and adults alike.

Problems and Limitations

A limitation that occurred several times over the course of this research paper was a failure to hear no response from said contributors. With the start of a new year and the near end of one for myself, the researcher and following participants followed different scheduled paths. Another problem I came across was how many respondents I had. I felt that if all my surveys had returned to me, I know that I would have had more information to further synthesize and conclude my research.

Another limitation is that, the information collected, was within two elementary schools and the University. This is not a valid representation of the whole peninsula. I chose to do research within the Monterey County and it has been a humbling experience. Welcomed by the small community, I am grateful for all those who have participated.

As I was making the surveys, I realized that the information and details could not all be obtained by online surveys. I feel that I may need to alter my investigations. Although I accumulated the information, I feel as if though more data could have been obtained. Another limitation involving the surveys was the type of language I used. It may have been too advanced for my subject participants, such as the pre-kindergarteners and first graders. But above all other limitations, time was not of the essence. There is never enough time when conducting a research proposal, especially with a full course of units, 2 jobs, and personal matters hitting left and right.

Recommendations

Because I was limited in time, I had limited involvement with the students involved in the above said research. The implementation of Mindfulness was brief and should it be successful, it

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will be key to keep continuity for the subject participants' own sake. The more practice they have, the more that they may grow familiar with the concept of Mindfulness. It starts with a once a week with introduction. For example, at CSUMB, 'Mindfulness Monday's, for example, was a set day for students and faculty to join during the day for a set time. In the classroom, it could be either Mondays, or Wednesdays or Fridays. Given these, they are the hardest schedules to adjust to. Small breathing exercises can be placed in the beginning of the day or near the end to get the children ready for the following week. Because movement can be integrated into a Mindfulness practice, having all instructors given proper-instructions and training on how Mindfulness could be implemented into the day's curriculum. Another suggestion I have is building outside the classroom. Like homework, the practice of Mindfulness can go home with the children and be practiced together. This can build on the relationship between parent and child. This also expands the practice of Mindfulness from the classroom to the home.

Conclusion

Mindfulness is a practice, a lifestyle that can be incorporated to anyone's day. This simple act can help students strive at the understanding on how one feels and relates to how others may feel. It can help students feel superior to their emotions, other than letting them boil over and cause added distress. Bohn' (2013) study has shown that the practice of Mindfulness has reduced stress. With this research paper, Mindfulness is not the cure of all student associated stress. However, Mindfulness may be a step into the right direction in healing the mind, body and soul. Together with the right attitude, the efforts made in the classroom will change the learning environment for everyone. I hope that this research paper helps aid anyone interested in the Practice of Mindfulness and how it's implementation will change the classroom learning environment.

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Appendix 1

Instructor Survey/Instructor A

1. What is Mindfulness to you?
2. When is it introduced to your class?
3. How often is it used in the classroom?
4. Do you see any positive or negative outcomes from your students?
5. Do students reach out and thank you for your implementation of Mindfulness?

Appendix 2

Teacher Surveys

1. When first introduced, did you find Mindfulness helpful?

Inside [], Outside [],or Both []

Yes [] or No []

2. Do you use Mindfulness inside and outside the classroom?

3. Is there a difference in behaviors or attitudes within the children?

Yes [] or No []

Appendix 3

Student Surveys

1. Did you like the Mindfulness Activity?

Yes [] or No []

2. Did you find it helpful?

Yes [] or No []

3. How likely are you to continue to use mindfulness outside school?
(Numbers 1- 3, 1 being the least likely and 3 being most likely.)

1 [], 2 [], 3 []

Appendix 4

