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School-based mindfulness programs: Transforming children's lives or merely a passing fad?

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Contribution

School-based mindfulness programs: Transforming children's lives or merely a passing fad?

During the past three decades, there has been increasing interest in mindfulness and mindfulness interventions due to a wealth of theoretical and empirical research linking them with positive psychosocial, cognitive and health outcomes (Keng, Smoski, & Robbins, 2011). The core features of mindfulness, namely awareness and non-judgmental acceptance of a person's moment-to-moment experience, are regarded as potentially effective antidotes against common forms of psychological distress, such as rumination, anxiety and anger; these often involve maladaptive tendencies to avoid, suppress, or over-engage with one's distressing thoughts and emotions (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; Keng, et al., 2011).

There has been increasing concern in recent years about the levels of stress and mental health difficulty in children and young people (CDCP, 2013; Greenberg, et al., 2003; MHF, 2004). Converging international evidence suggest that approximately one in four children experience a mental health difficulty with less than half of these receiving treatment from healthcare professionals (Merikangas, Nakamura, & Kessler, 2009). Given such findings it is perhaps unsurprising that mindfulness-based approaches have been adapted for use with child and adolescent populations (Semple, Lee & Millar, 2006; Shapiro, et al., 2008).

Schools are deemed to be an ideal setting for the delivery of many psychosocial interventions, including mindfulness-based programmes. School-based interventions may be targeted towards those who might benefit most, or delivered as part of a universal preventative approach, which can be important both in terms of cost-effectiveness and in reducing stigma (Kuyken, Weare, Ukoumunne, 2012). A growing body of research points to the positive impact of such programmes on

children's cognitive and psychosocial functioning (e.g., Broderick & Metz, 2009; Flook, et al., 2010; Mendelson et al., 2010; Noggle & Khalsa, 2010; Raes et al, 2013; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010)

However, given the speed with which mindfulness has been embraced by western culture, it is inevitable that some tensions have arisen. For instance, it is as yet unclear whether mindfulness, as introduced in western school contexts, is merely a passing fad or a practice that has the potential to alleviate distress and bring about sustained improvements in wellbeing. Clearly in western culture, mindfulness has become part of the popular zeitgeist (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Educators are being encouraged to incorporate mindfulness into the school day and there is an increasing market for mindfulness training courses, CDs, apps, and other merchandise (see for instance the Mindfulness in Schools Project based in the UK). Yet, it is not clear whether mindfulness practices are appropriate for children at all developmental stages. There is also concern that many school-based mindfulness programmes are implemented as add-ons rather than embedded within everyday school processes and interactions

Furthermore, mindfulness has a long and venerable tradition within Buddhist philosophy; yet as it is assimilated into western culture it is questionable whether its essence has remained intact (Shonin, Van Gordon, & Griffiths, 2014). Bodhi (2011), Dreyfus, (2011) and others highlight the potential dangers of holding incomplete understandings of mindfulness and of mindful practices that focus solely on sustained attention or person-centred awareness. A broader understanding of the core features of mindfulness, and of its spiritual underpinnings may be critical for guiding future practices in the West.

Thus, the primary objectives of this paper are to examine the current state of research on mindfulness based initiatives in school and early childhood settings. We explore the nature of mindfulness practices that are being introduced to children, including how they are adapted for children at different developmental stages. We also explore the intersections of two diverse traditions, eastern Buddhist philosophy and modern psychological science, and consider the implications for future mindfulness practices in educational contexts.

Method

The current paper forms part of a larger systematic review focusing on the effectiveness of school-based mindfulness practices on the socio-emotional and cognitive outcomes of children and young people. This review has been registered with the Cochrane Collaboration and involves a systematic search of all randomized control trials (RCTs) involving school based mindfulness programmes. The precise terms for this search strategy are currently being prepared. Subsequently, available data will be selected, synthesized and appraised based on pre-specified eligibility criteria.

The current paper however, goes beyond examining the evidence base. Thus in line with the objectives of this paper we consider broader research on mindfulness with children and youth, as well as literature focusing on the tensions and challenges of integrating mindfulness in secular western cultures. This review will include a search of key terms across electronic databases and key journals including *Mindfulness*, *Child Development Perspectives*, and *Contemporary Buddhism*

Expected Outcomes

An initial review of the literature shows a diverse range of practices have been introduced into schools under the mindfulness umbrella. Dominant approaches include Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR; Kabat-Zinn, 1990) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT; Segal, Williams, & Teasdale, 2002). Mindfulness techniques are often taught as part of multi-component interventions (e.g., as part of resilience or social and emotional learning programmes, Yoga and Thai Chi). There is also diversity in the extent to which school mindfulness programmes take cognisance of the historical roots of mindfulness or seek to embed mindful practice within the broader school values system or ethos.

As the diversity of mindfulness-based practices grows, it may be increasingly important that the essence of mindfulness is more fully understood. In Europe and other western cultures, children grow up in highly charged, mass consumer societies, where the desire to have more and be better is omnipresent. It could certainly be argued that there is a lot more to learn from Eastern philosophies that provide guidance on letting go of attachments and finding contentment in simply being. The challenges for educationalists may be in drawing together the best of what empirical science and Eastern philosophies have to offer and in so doing support authentic mindfulness practices that are consistent with underpinning traditions and core values of compassion and kindness.

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