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Comparative Analysis of Contemplative Pedagogy and its Possible Applications within Current International Education

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Abstract

While the variation of pedagogies has evolved over time in public school settings, there has also been a significant growth of alternative pedagogies over the mainstream circuit (Bodinet, 2016). One of lesser known pedagogical approaches within those, Contemplative Pedagogy, as well as its applications, have been explored in mostly-independent schools. The question arises: would it gain acceptance in mainstream education? The purpose of this paper is to explore the possible applications of Contemplative Pedagogy in an evidence-based international context, through the analysis of various Mindfulness training techniques and exercises aimed at heightening student awareness and self-knowledge within their larger societal context, and to analyze the impact of this approach within mainstream learning environments.

Keywords: Alternative pedagogies, contemplative pedagogy, mindfulness, international education, emotional learning.

Background

Pedagogy is often understood as a learning theory and the practice of such theory through the learning process. Variations

of pedagogies have evolved over time, reflective of the social or political nature of that period as well as the historical or scientific stance of the times. Such evolution attempted to explain and define the role of the educator and the role of the student, which even now, some argue, have no definite construct: Mills and McGregor (2016), Smallhorn (2017) and Aksakalli (2019), for instance, suggest that there are many variations and most teachers use a combination of pedagogies in their interactions with students. However, the theoretical framework of learning is carried out through institutions that shape the design of curriculum through student learning outcomes. As pedagogies evolve and new methods are concocted, tested and used, we notice a shift in educational paradigms over time. Bodinet (2016) describes the educational system we use today as largely created during the industrial revolution, which had a strong focus on the values and norms of the 18th and 19th centuries. Since then, education around the world has changed and is continuing to do so based on research and evidence, political drivers and institutional methodologies. As the world advances, educational reforms have been developed and implemented to help individuals adapt and become more socially assimilated. In recent decades, however, scholars began to promote student-centered learning by utilizing different pedagogical approaches such as the flipped classroom, the Socratic Method and Inquiry-based learning. Given the above scenario, with classrooms becoming more multicultural and methodologies more blended, and in spite of the seeming constraints documented by Flores (2017), I would like to further explore what other pedagogical tools teachers can use to advance learning rooted in less explored areas, such as in social and emotional elements using techniques that nurture the students' awareness and concentration, specifically through the application of Contemplative Pedagogy.

Research and Literature in Practice

Alternative pedagogies, also known as alternative education (AE) are classroom practices that derive from what we now know today as mainstream education, or mainstream pedagogy. Somewhere outside of that, there is also a focus on alternative learning environments, which could be found in independent and private schools, virtual learning environments and home-based learning. According to McGee and Lin's research (2016), these alternative environments strive to be more supportive than mainstream schooling and promote smaller sizes, religion-based communities or independent learning. Pedagogically, the approaches can come in the form of an unconventional classroom such as the Flipped Classroom, or methodological approaches such as the Montessori Method, the Waldorf Method, structure-free curriculum and contemplative pedagogy. The framework of alternative education lies in its structure to provide youth with an education that will subsequently aid in meeting the standardized requirements from a traditional classroom to an alternative one. In this paper we will focus on Contemplative Pedagogy, as research continues to evolve in and around this lesser-known pedagogical approach. My rationale for choosing this is rooted in my current educational context, as many of my students who attend the virtual school I work at strive for holistic growth focused on organic learning rather than having outcomes measured through standardized testing; they aim at gaining quantifiable social experiences in school while achieving emotional peace and tranquility through disengagement with the traditional. Therefore, this paper aims to find and share information that could potentially be added to the knowledge-base of Contemplative Pedagogy, thus potentially helping learners achieve those goals.

Empirical studies on Contemplative Pedagogy have been measured in a variety of approaches, most notably through

observation, academic achievements as well as through social and emotional competence. O'Donnell (2015) and Bach *et al* (2015) takes us through some of the ways students have deviated from paying attention in the classroom, such as the sole focus for achievement starting at an early age, the increased spotlight on Capitalism and success, and sensory overload brought upon by the increase in technology. There are many forms of contemplative pedagogy, notably to shift systematic learning to connect students to be more aware of themselves and the world around them. Thomas (2016) describes it as pedagogy that includes mindfulness activities, meditation, and cultivating knowledge through understanding our role in the world, and develops a capacity of concentration even in the midst of noise. Gardner's (2020) recent research demonstrates the positive outcomes of Contemplative Pedagogy. Over a six-year period, she gathered reflection journals from over 228 students. Her research design includes a qualitative study using a narrative methodology analysis that took place in a 2-year period and consisted of 3 stages. The findings showed that most students embodied the learning process through direct and indirect mindfulness. Her research also showed that mindfulness regulates the attitude of a student's awareness intrinsically, and that the state of mind of most students revealed a deeper awareness of their social environment. Some of the techniques used were discussions on mindfulness, guided group meditation, taking time during class to write reflections and pose questions while using terminology associated with mindfulness. Additionally, some forms of yoga such as Yin and Restorative have shown to have a positive benefit in relieving anxiety and improving mood among students in school (Hylander *et al.*, 2017); however, it is not exclusive to education as there has been extensive evidence-based research done on the effects of yoga

(Ross *et al.*, 2013; Wang and Hagins, 2016; Adling and Bangar, 2017) for the general population.

Stance and applications of Contemplative Pedagogy

Overview

An example of a driving force in untraditional classrooms is the practice of Critical Pedagogy (Mclaren, 2019). Critical pedagogy is a practice that has its roots in Critical Theory, wherein the intent of the educator is to promote learning by using students' awareness of their societal positions in the self and enable them to form a relationship with the larger society. Giroux's (2020) stance on Critical Pedagogy is formed by empowering the students to take a critical stance on their surroundings, as this will allow them to become successful learners (*ibid*). He also goes on to link Critical Pedagogy as a critique against traditional pedagogy as it requires mastery of knowledge, logic and "fundamentalisms that require authority by erasing any trace of subaltern histories, class struggles, and racial and gender inequalities and injustices (*ibid*, p. 3). Lissovoy (2016) further injects that students are encouraged to reflect on experiences and connect knowledge to a greater level than they are expected and recognize that everything they learn can always be altered, since it is believed that education addresses the democratic usage of knowledge in an unequal context. Critical Pedagogy also identifies educational discourses that have morphed over the years, such as the roles of students and teachers as well as cultural manifestations. These elements bring us to another, lesser-known methodology that has slowly begun to gain recognition and which is the focus of this paper: Contemplative Pedagogy. The available literature details is as a way for students to apply skills they are expected to learn, while educators take

into account different techniques that aid in helping them integrate Mindfulness training and learning within the educational parameters (Rickert *et al.*, 2016; Franco *et al.*, 2016). Some learning approaches use techniques that help students reach a deeper, calmer state of awareness, such as mindfulness, open communication, certain forms of meditation and personal reflection (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Beer, 2010; Cooke, 2015). These techniques also promote self-inquiry, decision-making and constructive thinking. Flores (2017) asserts that academic performance is linked to self-understanding and exploration of self-development. One example of a contemplative pedagogical technique is the practice of mindfulness meditation and mindfulness training, as documented by Hartel (2017). Furthermore, other researchers, such as Baird *et al.*, (2014), Chess (2013) and Penberthy (2016) have conjectured that activities that foster the practice of mindfulness training will show forms of student preparedness and raise motivation. If contemplative pedagogy aids the development of positive self-awareness, there can potentially be a significant improvement in the social and emotional behaviors of students, thus improving learning outcomes (Hartel, 2017; Flores, 2017). Mindfulness training could perhaps complement traditional education in public schools by using techniques that are designed to help quiet the mind to foster the learning process. It should be noted that earlier research showed that educators were less inclined to include meditation in the classroom due to the concern that the practice of the technique did not convey secular ethics and values, as established in the United States' Constitution (Hart, 2004). Other concerns lie in what Mayes and Ferrin (2001) refer to as "spiritual commitments", which describes how a teacher's delivery of mindfulness practices may be a conflict upon their duties as a teacher and their potentially own spiritual practice. Even earlier research (Dantley, 1990) describes mindfulness practice as a

show of misalignment with foundational education in social settings, and ultimately not making a positive contribution to social and economic realities in poor urban areas. While this is a particularly strong consideration, it is also true that alternative pedagogies were not explored in such depth due to more pressing educational priorities such as public school reforms and standardizations from the 1990s-2000 (National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2003)). During that period in the late 90s, the United States focused on creating assessments that met standardized criteria that complimented content tailored to course standards. With alternative pedagogies, it was difficult to implement in the public school sector, so charter schools and magnet schools that served as an alternative began to grow as it gave parents greater autonomy over choices for their children and their educational philosophies. Manno (1997) describes how during that decade, charter schools became the target for research and development as they were institutions that experimented with alternative pedagogies and had a stronger philosophical model on holistic and naturalistic learning models. However, what sparked a widespread progression of research was not due to stagnant curiosity but a spike in suicide among school aged children and teens during that decade (McKeown *et al.*, 2006). Improved pedagogical approaches became an important discussion due to the multitude of learning demands, assessments and learning challenges that students face. Over time, the stigma of mindfulness training in classrooms dwindled down as progressing research shows pedagogical purpose in what the students receive. Evidence-based research draws upon a variety of techniques that alienates religious and cultural foundations with the focus on creating a space of inclusion and adopting openness.

Contemplative pedagogy in an international context – the example of Japan

A country that ranks highly in education and safety amongst other OECD countries is Japan, with 7.8/10 in education and 8.4/10 in safety respectively (Japan – OECD, 2020). The way the Japanese live and conduct their lives has been rooted in their culture for centuries, starting with teachings from Japanese monk Hakuin Ekaku, who influenced the teachings of Zen Buddhism in Japan to cultivate awareness of self and the individual's role in society to achieve engagement with a holistic cognitive perception (Shoji *et al.*, 2018). This may be significant to the formation of Contemplative Pedagogy as many of its roots share similarities to how Japanese students behave in school and in society. Low crime rates and education may have a link to the country's introspective society as suggested by Kishi *et al* (2018). They did a study on social factors that prevented people from committing crimes, and the two elements mentioned most frequently were the damage a person could cause to family structure and becoming the source of stress for someone else. The link conveys incredible insights to the Japanese and their logical reasoning toward role in society.

In education, the term Contemplative Pedagogy does not exist in Japan, though the similar practice of what is aptly named mindful pedagogy is customary in the public school sector (Sevilla, 2015), integrating Buddhist ideology such as non-violence behavior, non-attachment and ethical conduct within the educational system. He offers an argument between the holistic idealism of Japanese education as well as the contradictions that occur in the overall social and emotional connection that is absent due to the rigors of academic achievement and stress management. Philosophically, the idea of mindfulness stems from the *vipassana* practices in Theraveda Buddhism, which is the use of observation of physical and

mental changes in the body (Pagis, 2019). The Japanese have adopted and modified its existence to teach school children how to behave intrinsically. The same research by Sevilla gives four objectives to mindful pedagogy that are taught at an early age: building focus, developing a contemplative and introspective approach to course activities, cultivating compassion and improving self-understanding. By instilling these objectives in students early on, student traits are clearly connected to the cognitive social and emotional behaviors of these objectives. Alternatively, he presents an argument that the foundation of mindful pedagogy in Japanese students may lead to self-understanding as the most intimate part of their nature, though there may not be an awareness of the dogmatism that is also present with an assessment heavy, test-based curricula. Nonetheless, the awareness of mindfulness practices that is acquired intrinsically could perhaps be a model to be used in other educational contexts.

An example of contemplative pedagogy in a Western classroom

As a way of contrast, and to illustrate the possible benefits of Contemplative Pedagogy in contexts where mindfulness, meditation and self-reflection might be more foreign and not as integrated as in Japan, this paper will explore the current research in selected Irish primary schools as well as the ongoing circumstances in England.

In Ireland, Keating (2016) undertook a 2-year research on 70 Irish primary school students, ages 7-11 years of age, in mindfulness meditation. He piloted the study with participants that received guided meditation twice a week for one minute per year of age. The findings were collected through two 30-minute interviews several weeks apart. The interviews consisted of open ended questions that promoted the students to develop their own ideas in their meditation experience. Additionally, he used

photographs to elicit responses from the students to the capacity that they were able to identify metaphorically what image reminded them of how they felt during meditation. The findings in the study were presented as first-person narratives to convey a students' personal experience. The outcome of his research posits that mediation deepens students' capacity for awareness and leads them to unconsciously be a more critical thinker, which links Gardner's (2020) above research on the positive outcomes, especially though guided meditation.

Further to the above, English schools recently added Mindfulness as a subject and the British Government invested public funds in 2019 to launch research into the benefits of Mindfulness in classrooms (UK GOV, 2019). The study has been collecting data from 370 schools in England, with students taking part in a series of trials in different mindfulness exercises. The study, which is set to expire in 2021, has so far explored relaxation techniques to help regulate emotions as well as breathing exercises to strengthen mental well-being, and results are being collected by mental health experts that will use the data to find a link between significant roles that teachers have in school to developing vital care approaches to help students achieve a level of harmony that seems to be fluctuating in the modern world. The British government is piloting this trial to help identify mental health disorders and creating best practices for medical professionals. At the time of this research paper, the British government has not released any updates or data concerning this study publicly. The obvious difference is we can see between the U.K. and Japan is that the study in the U.K. is an initiative set by the government that they "will identify the mental health and broader wellbeing needs of these children, including whether a referral to a more specialist service is needed" (p. 16). The focus is on identifying mental health issues and to create procedures that ensure best practices are in place at

schools. Moreover, in the Japanese context, students learn mindfulness techniques intrinsically. Notwithstanding, there are cultural differences to consider, especially since the U.K. is not a predominantly Buddhist country as Japan as Shoji *et al* (2018) earlier concluded.

Drawbacks

Mindfulness training, which includes meditation of many forms: guided, seated, walking, reflection writing, intention setting, deep breathing exercises and stillness exercises have shown reasonable significance in schools at a steady pace as Gardner's (2020) research above suggests, and there is meaningful consideration to acknowledge that students have adopted the practices in schools and the general consensus does show effectiveness in the classroom. However, research shows that there have been adverse reactions among students pedagogically (Dobkin *et al.*, 2018; Wong *et al.*, 2018; Lindahl *et al.*, 2017). Some of the reactions reported through the last four decades have been signs of anxiety, traumatic memories, and spiritual confusion. Since the negative outcomes affected students' physical and mental health, it could be argued that the emergence of self-awareness through mindfulness training might result in emotional traumas that reemerge and cause unexpected distress. Mindfulness practice may heighten a student's awareness of the surroundings around them, but it could also trigger strong emotions that challenge medical complications they might be facing, and they may not even be aware of it. It is possible that evidence surrounding mindfulness training in classrooms could be at the heels of the enthusiasm that it receives. While Gardner's (2020) research showed well-founded benefits, long term research in clinical trials has also shown that in some cases mindfulness training has produced small improvements in

reducing stress or improving one's quality of life. Very little evidence supports the effectiveness on self-awareness, attention span improvement or sleep (Cebolla *et al.*, 2017; Lindahl *et al.*, 2017; Khoury *et al.*, 2013; Mesmer-Magnus *et al.*, 2017). In fact, most of the research showed that it did not lead to long-term outcomes compared to traditional drug-based medical intervention. Meanwhile, less formal research by Anderson *et al.* (2019) was conducted on the online forum *Reddit*, curated publicly by individuals who have common interests, and collectively share topics and advice for others (Jhaver *et al.*, 2019). The questionnaire was designed with open-ended and closed multiple choice questions about their experiences of meditation, perceived benefits and any drawbacks. Of the 240 participants who completed the survey, more than 88% continue to practice mindfulness training, while 12% stopped. Of those 12%, a high number of participants say they stopped due to a negative emotional response, or a bad experience not triggered by medication but through the reliving of emotional traumas. Although not without its own contextual limitations - *Reddit* users are predominately from the United States, and disproportionately male in the-between-secondary-school ages to late 20's, according to Sattelberg (2020) - the findings were similar to those of Dobkin *et al.* (2018), Wong *et al.* (2018) and Lindahl *et al.* (2017), whose research was not conducted online, but in a controlled study with targeted participants. *Reddit's* statistical research leads us to make a strong conclusion that mindfulness training could result in emotional traumas and distress, especially for young men.

Looking ahead

Based on the analysis and discussion thus far, it is my position that the notion that contemplative pedagogy has no room in conventional schools should be challenged; mindfulness training

as a pedagogical tool has shown positive significance in the classroom as Gardner (2020) earlier suggested. Kim (2020) asserts that mindfulness training in the classroom serves an important focus but pedagogically it should be delivered in a seamless, non-judgmental and non-obvious way which will take away from the focus that mindfulness training as an intervention. CASEL, or the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning, an organization of experts in the field of Social and Emotional Learning suggests in their latest journal (2020) that mindfulness training in Contemplative Pedagogy is a stimulating trigger for intellectual development in students. Some of the activities they recommend be integrated in the classroom could include:

1. Pinwheel breathing: This could help students practice deep breathing in a large classroom.
2. Class Contracts: This may encourage students to be responsible in collaborating with their classmates on their expectations as a student and you as their teacher.
3. Journaling Prompts: This could help students reflect, especially on internal and external feelings that they are experiencing.
4. Body Scanning: This may help students focus on physical and emotional sensations. This could also be combined as a form of meditation.
5. Snack Exercise: Using food as a way for students to practice their five senses; with questions such as: what do they smell like? What does it look like? What does it feel like? What does it taste like? And, what does it sound like?

In analyzing the validity of approaches to students' social and emotional development in Contemplative Pedagogy, all of these techniques promote self-inquiry, decision making, exploration as Flores (2017) and Keating (2016) earlier suggested,

with Flores also noting the importance of making a link between academic performance and exploration of self-development, and Keating making a link between a students' experience and meditation practices supporting a student's educational path. We could perhaps accept that as best pedagogical practices go, the activities above could work with most students. It is important that activities used in classrooms support student preparedness and raise their motivation as a few researchers have mentioned earlier (Baird *et al.*, 2014; Chess, 2013; Penberthy, 2016). Since public schools are largely standardized in what students are expected to learn, complementing aspects of Contemplative Pedagogy into teaching may give students support and all of the benefits without sacrificing academic performance.

Conclusions

Does Contemplative Pedagogy have a place in mainstream public schools? In looking at the research covered above, and though not without criticism from educators, Contemplative Pedagogy has made its way into the mainstream education through the evolution of Alternative Pedagogies. As noted above, educational paradigms shift as societies evolve and values that are important during one period may take on a different value system in another period. As such, we can see by how methodologies are constantly being redeveloped, the focus to adapt to student needs. In practice, this paper shows evidence that there is strong merit in Contemplative Pedagogy, especially with the increasing academic pressure, bullying and learning difficulties faced by students today. In Gardner's (2020) research mentioned earlier, mindfulness practices have shown to increase in student awareness and their relationships to learning. Having that pedagogical element reveals a positive impact in learning,

whether students are in realization of it or not. It does not take away from the curriculum nor does it have a particular negative disadvantage to students. Because of the lesser-known techniques in the classroom (mediations, reflective journaling, breathing exercises), students are also able to take stronger control of their learning by being able to manifest their focus in becoming more self-aware. Additionally, the UK has been collecting data on a Mindfulness study across various British schools, which shows that there is potential there to make Mindfulness a regular practice in the curriculum. The drawbacks of Contemplative Pedagogy have not shown significant adverse effects on the mainstream population though students with medical pre-conditions may be distressed as researched by Wong *et al* (2018). Overall, the research that has been produced have not shown long-term disadvantages, and very little evidence supports long-term drawbacks in general.

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