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Mindfulness Training in Early Childhood Education

Trening mindfulness w edukacji wczesnoszkolnej

KEYWORDS

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ABSTRACT

This text presents the main characteristics of mindfulness practice and seeks to draw a parallel among some aspects of didactics for early childhood education. Research suggests that mindfulness practice has had a positive impact on the adult population. While surveys on the use of mindfulness with children are scarce at present, this type of research is increasing among educators and psychologists targeting primary school level and beyond. In this article, we present the methods by which mindfulness practice can be applied in the teaching of nursery and pre-primary school children. In some instances, there is evidence that activities present in the Montessori Method can be borrowed and developed in accordance with the principles of the Mindfulness training. This article outlines how typical activities, such as sensory-motor practice, selective attention exercises and the exercises of practical life can be applied in the mindfulness training. Teacher training is another aspect to consider when applying mindfulness practice in the nursery school classroom.

SŁOWA KLUCZE

mindfulness,
wczesne dzieciństwo,
koncentracja, me-
tody dydaktyczne,
praktyka

ABSTRAKT

Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia główne cechy praktyki mindfulness i stara się wskazać analogię do niektórych aspektów dotyczących dydaktyki edukacji wczesnoszkolnej. Badania sugerują, że praktyka mindfulness ma pozytywny wpływ na populację dorosłych. Natomiast badania dotyczące wykorzystania mindfulness w pracy z dzieć-

mi są obecnie rzadkie, chociaż są coraz częściej podejmowane przez pedagogów i psychologów ukierunkowanych na poziom szkoły podstawowej i nie tylko. W niniejszym artykule przedstawiamy metody, dzięki którym praktyka mindfulness może być stosowana w nauczaniu dzieci w wieku przedszkolnym i przedprzedszkolnym. W niektórych przypadkach istnieją dowody na to, że aktywności obecne w metodzie Montessori mogą być zapożyczone i rozwinięte zgodnie z zasadami treningu mindfulness. Niniejszy artykuł przedstawia, w jaki sposób typowe zajęcia, takie jak ćwiczenia sensoryczno-motoryczne, ćwiczenia selektywnej uwagi i ćwiczenia z życia praktycznego mogą być prowadzone pod kątem treningu mindfulness. Szkolenie nauczycieli to kolejny aspekt, który należy rozważyć przy stosowaniu praktyki mindfulness w klasie przedszkolnej.

Introduction

Mindfulness is a group of practices focused on the development of self-awareness through the systematic use of concentration. Mindfulness involves targeting one's attention on the present moment without any judgmental attitude. Mindfulness experiences in adults began to be studied in the 1990's and research findings were positive. Mindfulness practices were related to feelings of well-being (Brown et al., 2007). There has been research on the practice of meditation with high school and middle school students which indicates positive outcomes for these age groups (Britton et al., 2010; Broderick et al., 2010; Mendelson et al., 2010). By contrast, research involving young children has just begun with positive effects (Burke, 2010; Thompson & Gauntlett-Gilbert, 2008). For example, seven and eight-year-old children with anxiety benefited from sitting and focusing on their breathing for several minutes (Semple et al., 2005). Research is scarce for preschool children as it is difficult to decide what practices are appropriate for that age group (Lillard, 2011). The most noteworthy study was conducted in 2015 by Flook, Goldberg, Pinger and Davidson, which examined the effects of mindfulness training in encouraging social behaviour and self-control in pre-school children. Children involved in the intervention group demonstrated greater social competences, higher performance in the learning process, and improved health and emotional development in comparison with those taking part in the control group.

Another research group, Kennedy, Whiting and Dixon (2014), examined the effects of using the procedure called ACT (Acceptance and Commitment Therapy) created by Hayes in 2004, to encourage improved eating habits in children aged three to five. ACT is based on three pillars: acceptance, commitment, and a value-based life style. Acceptance is awareness of one's unique experiences; commitment and

a value-based life style involve a struggle against psychological problems and the will and strength to cope with these problems during one's life. ACT can be adapted to young children in developing concentration and acceptance of what these children are experiencing at any given moment.

Another interesting study on mindfulness is the meta-analysis by Willis and Dinehart (2014) concerning the importance of learning self-control and meditation in early childhood as effective developmental tools. Self-control and meditation appear to play an integral role in a child's academic success. Based on the above-mentioned research, mindful practices should be included in the curriculum for early childhood education.

The aim of this contribution is to present practices based in part on different didactical methods for early childhood education, one of which was explored by Lillard (2011) and corroborated by Mayclin Stephenson (2018) and found in the Montessori method. Another practice is explored based on direct experiences with children aged two to three to be used in the development of mindfulness from an early age. Mindfulness practices can be important elements in the educational planning for toddlers and pre-school children. The parallels that can be drawn between the Montessori method and mindfulness practice can be used to form the basis for a curriculum at the nursery school level.

The first step in mindfulness practice: concentration and silence

Kabat-Zinn, the initiator of mindfulness practice, defines mindfulness as "an awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally and in the service of self-understanding and wisdom" (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 16). One of the aspects of mindfulness is promoting selective attention and concentration on the present moment, on what is happening in the "here and now." The attitudes of curiosity, openness, and acceptance allow people to be in touch with their experiences through a new way of being instead of doing (Kabat-Zinn, 1990).

The first step in mindfulness practice is concentrating on one's way of breathing, but it is also possible to concentrate on other movements or actions during the day (Jha et al., 2007).

Annaka Harris, an author who teaches mindfulness to children, says that mindfulness gives children the beauty of being in the present moment. In terms of developing mindfulness in toddlers, mindfulness exercises can help them to be in touch with their feelings of happiness, allowing their attention to shift from a negative experience to

a positive one through practices such as the sensation of their own breath (Greenland & Harris, 2017).

Even for Montessori, concentration is a fundamental concept. She recounts an episode that happened in the Children's House, involving a four-month-old child who was brought there by Montessori herself. The child was breathing quietly without making any noise and Montessori dared the other children to do the same. Montessori realized that the children were sitting motionless in surprise and holding their breath. In that moment, there was a stunned silence; the ticking of the clock became audible. The child appeared to have brought with her an atmosphere of total silence unlike anything that exists in real life. Montessori noticed that this experience taught the children to stay still, to control their breathing and assume a relaxed and focused attitude, much like that of meditation. In this way, the children discovered that, when immersed in total silence, one can begin to perceive the slightest noise, such as that of a drop of water falling in the distance or the far-off chirping of a bird. This experience became the basis for the exercise of silence that characterizes Montessori's Children's House (Montessori, 1999, pp. 167–168).

Mindfulness practices help children to achieve this attitude of silence based on an attention to detail, from feeling their breathing to perceiving the sounds of nature or the noise in the surrounding environment. This practice creates in children an attitude characterized by concentration, reflection, and an awareness of what is happening around them and within them. The path from silence to concentration leads to an inner calm. Silence for Montessori does not mean an absence of noise but rather an inward attitude of concentration and interiorization of one's experiences or surroundings.

Therefore, the silence is connected to one's ability for wonder at what is happening around him.

It is a condition that allows him to experience sensations and emotions fully and in their totality.

The learning of silence promotes a rich inner life, which requires an ability to concentrate and to visualize an inner space dedicated to reflection and enjoyment.

This attitude is described by Montessori when she presents exercises for silence and when she calls the children by name voicelessly. She describes how the children heard their names called out and attempted to approach Montessori in silence moving around objects so as not to bump into them, but quietly running without making any noise. The result of these exercises was that of presence of mind, agility, attention to small objects, amazement, a heightened sensibility toward achieving a common framework, and more intense concentration. According to the Montessori method, learning silence and concentration is closely connected to learning through the senses.

Mindfulness and sensory-motor experience

Sensory experience is a significant aspect of mindfulness training. A relevant example of a mindfulness exercise might be that of eating a piece of fruit and paying close attention to its texture and colour while at the same time enjoying its flavour and consistency on the tongue and in the mouth. All sensory experiences are emphasized, including those of sound, touch, and sight. The mind and body are connected through the sensory and motor systems as they take information from the environment and process how one's motor acts change within the environment itself. Body and mind are integrated when one focuses on these sensory and motor experiences. Several psychologists recognize the important role that bodily experiences may play in cognition and vice-versa (Glenberg, 1999; Niedenthal et al., 2005; Lillard, 2011).

According to Montessori, sensory-motor education is fundamental for any further development of a child's personality. The clear value of education and the cultivation of the senses provide a better-founded and richer basis for the development of intelligence. Through the senses and movement during the exploration of the environment, one's intelligence produces more complex ideas without which the functioning of the mind would lack grounding, rigor, intuition, and insight (Montessori, 1950).

By following the Montessori method, one can find useful exercises to practise sensory education, exercises which share a close similarity to the mindfulness practice of the senses. For example, in Montessori the Children's House, three-year-olds learn to distinguish among different smells, sounds, colours, and textures by using materials, musical instruments, fruit, and other structural tools.

Typically, class materials will include sets of musical bells, used to train the child's ear to distinguish different musical sounds. Bells are placed around the room and children are asked to match the different bells to their sounds. In order to do so, the child must play each bell, hold the sound in his mind then move about the room and match up the same tones. An exercise of this kind establishes sensorial focus but also trains the child's working memory. In addition to sound matching exercises, Montessori also presents exercises using taste and smell, where the child must match objects that taste or smell the same, all while wearing a blindfold.

The child's sensory education is also stimulated by using bars of different gradation of colours and with solids of the same form but with a gradation of sizes. Other solids are of varying geometrical shapes while others are of the same size, but with different weights. Each group represents the same quality, but two different degrees. Therefore, there is a series of gradation where the difference between each object varies with regularity, and when possible, is measured mathematically. The general criteria for these differences are, however, subject to a practical determination of the child's

developmental level. The choice of materials should be based on what effectively “interests” the child and which engages him in a spontaneous and repeated activity.

Other sensory and motor exercises for children are those which focus on silence. In the Montessori method as well, we can find an activity called “the silence game” which helps to develop the child’s awareness of what is happening around him in that moment. Similarly, in mindfulness training, there is a focus on developing concentration on one’s surroundings and being in the moment. When children engage in the silence game, according to Montessori, they also become more careful in their actions and more attentive to others. The attention to sensory and motor experience in early childhood education also includes what Montessori calls “lessons of grace and courtesy,” which centre on the child’s interaction with the environment and with those around him. In mindfulness training, there is also an emphasis placed on the results of one’s actions in relationship with others. An example would be not invading the space of others or moving objects quietly or not bumping into other children or objects in the room. Another exercise used by Montessori that involves mindfulness training is walking on the line. In this activity, the child walks along an elliptical line drawn on the floor, putting one foot in front of the other, heel to toe, while holding an object in his hands. An exercise of this kind trains children to develop balance and to pay attention to the movements of their hands and feet (Montessori, 1950, p. 312). Montessori reminds us that this exercise also helps to form the child’s personality (Montessori, 1989, p. 65). This same exercise recalls the zen-practice of *kin-in* used in mindfulness training during which the person pays attention to each individual step while walking. The person begins by lifting his right foot while trying to match the rhythm of each step to his breathing. The object is to synchronize one’s walking with the pace of others around him. This exercise serves to develop self-awareness and a sense of one’s presence in the world and in the presence of others who form part of the reality in which he lives.

Mindfulness practice promotes this level of care of movement. Hanh (1999, 2009) recounts his experience as a novice monk when he was asked to carry out an activity for his teacher. On leaving the room in mindless excitement, he was called back by his teacher so that he could close the door behind him. Since that day, explains Hanh, “I have known how to close the door behind me” (Hanh, 2009, p. 79). Kabat-Zinn (2021, pp. 201–202) cites an example of climbing stairs with an awareness of one’s whole body.

In our schools, the attention to sensory-motor experience is present while not being strictly part of the curriculum. In pre-school, teachers propose psychomotricity as a project, and an expert comes once or twice a week to guide children in sensory-motor experiences. Psychomotricity, which is based on movement, thought, and emotions intertwined together, should be part of everyday life in nursery and pre-primary

schools. Children should have the opportunity to explore contexts by moving around, climbing stairs, listening to different noises and sounds in the environment, following what is happening around them, using their hands for arts and crafts, etc. During these activities, children should be guided to reflect on what they are doing, and in this way, become aware of their actions. This practice of reflecting and becoming aware recalls metacognitive didactics, whose aim it is to achieve a higher level of cognition and the ability to control cognitive processes. Metacognition didactics appears to share the same processes and aims of mindfulness practice. Metacognition aims to help children to become aware of their thoughts and feelings and to develop an ability to control cognitive processes and their emotions. Mindfulness has as its goal to promote awareness of one's thoughts and emotions, and of what is happening around him and in his interior being in the moment. Both metacognition and mindfulness educate children in the care of themselves, of others and of the environment around them.

Practical work of life and other mindfulness parallels

The attention to sensory-motor activities results in a child's care for the practical work of life. According to Kabat-Zin, placing attention and importance on activities of daily life, such as setting the table, eating, washing dishes, etc., will develop not only the ability to carry out these tasks, but also the child's self-esteem and self-efficacy and the attention for others. From nursery school on, children should engage in what Montessori calls "exercices of practical life." These exercises may include toddlers' setting the table, carrying their food to the table, and clearing the table after eating. These activities are carried out in specific, organized steps. As Montessori noticed, "there is a strict relationship between manual labor and deep concentration of the spirit" (Montessori, 1950, p. 71). The activities of practical life are important because they show the shared connection between body and mind. The activities of practical life in the Montessori method owe their importance to the fact that they provide a functional goal for the child to attain along with a series of bodily movements to guide the child in his endeavors. Nursery and pre-primary schools should support activities to sustain daily functioning, such as squeezing oranges for juice, preparing simple dishes, cleaning up the classroom, tidying up, etc. Through these activities, children can learn how body and mind work as one to pursue a concrete aim. From the aspect of mindfulness, children develop the ability to concentrate from the execution of activities of daily life.

Another characteristic of mindfulness practice is its emphasis on being non-judgmental towards others. Children should learn to make a distinction between witnessing the behaviour of others and passing judgement on others. The person can observe

and notice behaviour, but should not judge this as being good or bad. Kabat-Zinn says that this attitude requires that one “become aware of the constant stream of judging [...] and learn to step back from it” (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, p. 33). The same Kabat-Zinn reminds us of the need to trust in our intuition and our own authority. In the scholastic system, children from an early age are trained to accept teachers as judges of their work and of their behaviour. A child’s own sense of authority is almost always of secondary importance. To allow for the full development of the child’s personality, it is necessary to stimulate a self-awareness of his actions and the capacity for self-correction, self-modification, and self-evaluation (Costa & Kallick, 2004; Comoglio, 2007). Even the youngest children can be trained in this behaviour by having them engage in games using objects which, for example, need to be arranged or placed in the right space. Examples of this include puzzle boxes or jigsaw puzzles. When the child understands that he has made a mistake in matching a shape, he will try to find the right placement again and again. The child that possesses this ability of self-correction will not feel judged by the teacher. Montessori set up her method according to non-authoritarian behaviour on the part of the teacher. If a child makes a mistake and he does not understand his mistake, he is not to be scolded, but rather he should be shown how to do the game or the activity correctly.

The use of story-telling is a significant aspect of mindfulness practice. This technique originates from the tradition in Oriental philosophy to educate through telling stories or parables. Bruner maintains that stories are a powerful means to achieve learning, as we tend to represent our experiences through narratives (Bruner, 1990). Children can be taught, for example, the value of friendship through stories about animals that become friends. Story-telling can be used to develop awareness of one’s emotions with stories about joy, sadness, anger, and so on. Story-telling can also be used to present scholastic content, such as the water cycle explained through a story of a drop of water.

Teacher training

Nursery and pre-primary teacher training is starting to allow for mindfulness practice preparation in the classroom, and in Italy, various courses are being offered to trainees. One course consists of providing teachers with both theoretical and practical knowledge in order to understand the usefulness of mindfulness techniques. Practical hands-on experience designed specifically for teachers is presented to allow for a deeper understanding of the precepts of mindfulness. The course includes a series of concrete suggestions for classroom management and conflict resolution which can arise while all the time working with parents, students, and colleagues.

Another course for nursery school teachers involves strategies and activities to use in classes with children of three to five years of age. The course provides teaching strategies to guide and educate nursery school pupils in attitudes and behaviour based on the precepts of mindfulness. The objective is to make the child feel at ease in the school setting and guide him towards a state of psychological wellbeing. The teacher will acquire knowledge of how mindfulness can shape his own approach to teaching. The children are provided with tools for self-control and emotional self-management of conflict and of the complexities that can arise in the school setting.

Mindfulness practice involves teachers' awareness of their own selves. They learn how to become aware of their own psychological issues so that they can focus exclusively on the child's needs without any external interference. This attitude is essential for the good practice of the teaching profession. In mindfulness, the teacher should exhibit loving kindness towards children, one of the basic precepts of mindfulness (Salzberg, 2004).

Another important aspect of mindfulness practice is that of observation, which teachers should learn in order to address the child's needs. Observation requires concentration on the part of the teacher. In mindfulness practice, the teacher will find several exercises to aid in concentration. Another important element in training is represented by relaxation techniques which teachers should develop and practice on a daily basis before working with children in the classroom.

Mindfulness at a nursery school: an informal survey

In the school year 2021–2022, an informal survey was taken in two nursery schools in Rome. Two groups of children from two to three years of age were involved in mindfulness practice as intervention groups. Another group of the same age functioned as a control group where mindfulness practice activities were not part of the curriculum.

Children in the intervention group participated in activities of selective attention (i.e. observing details of a leaf, a flower, a small animal or a cloud in the sky). Children were also asked to focus on their breathing and their movements, such as walking or climbing or moving objects from one place to another. The book "Sitting Still Like a Frog. Mindfulness Exercises for Kids" (Snel, 2016) was also used as a source of games and activities to promote the child's awareness of what he was doing in different moments of the day.

During mindfulness exercises, children were observed by the educators, who recorded the data using grids and tables. The aims of the observation process were to determine if these activities resulted in positive attitudes or had little or no effect on

behaviour. This behaviour was measured by a series of parameters which included the length of time that the child spent on the activity itself, how effectively the child could maintain his concentration level when distracted, how and how often the child engaged with his peers and the child's emotional self-control during the activity. During observation, the measurement tool used was the Social Behaviour Scale (SBS) (Merrell & Caldarella, 2008). This scale was used for exploratory and confirmatory factor analysis in Italian preschool children. The three factors included in the scale are: Emotional Competency, Social Engagement, and Aggressiveness. The data were then compiled and analyzed by the group of educators together with the researchers. It was found that the children in the intervention groups exhibited more positive attitudes, greater ability to concentrate, increased peer engagement and emotional self-control. These data would be used to inform the future curriculum in nursery school. The children in the control group, instead, appeared to have shorter attention spans and were less likely to engage with peers. In other words, the children in the control group did not exhibit the same level of concentration as did the children in the intervention groups.

This informal survey was conducted over a period of two months, which might be deemed too short for a definitive result. However, the data coming from the observation of the three groups indicate the effectiveness of mindfulness programs and align with the results of the research by Broderick and collaborators in 2010, and by Eccles and collaborators in 1993. According to their findings, children who participate in mindfulness training show improved psychological health. Evidently, the person-environment fit is enhanced by mindfulness practice. This is the reason for which mindfulness should play a greater role in the school curriculum starting from a very early age. The nursery school curriculum should include activities that involve exploring the natural environment around the child and offer him the opportunity to observe, touch and handle the natural elements found in the environment.

These activities should be designed to contribute to the development of the child's selective attention and his ability to concentrate on what he is doing at any given moment.

Mindfulness exercises are to be envisaged as play time and be used to complement the activities with the purpose of creating a feeling of psychological well-being even in children of nursery school age.

Conclusions

If we look at the precepts of mindfulness practice, we can find useful suggestions to formulate an educational and teaching framework centred on young children. This framework should emphasize deep concentration to achieve balance and joy leading to

healthy relationships with others and with one's environment. Sensory-motor experiences play a major role in building this framework. The connection between body and mind is another focus of mindfulness. The connection that exists among body, mind, and emotions, typically found in mindfulness, accurately reflects the developmental stages of a child from zero to six years of age. Children in this age group live their experiences at a perceptive, emotional, and motor level, and thanks to these experiences, they build daily a knowledge of themselves, of others and of the world around them.

By carrying out the exercises of Practical Life, children can use their body and mind together. Activities such as squeezing an orange to make juice or setting the table can represent an opportunity to concentrate on what they are doing and why they are doing it. The self-awareness that emerges from these actions recalls mindfulness practice for selective attention and concentration.

Studies have found that mindfulness practice in schools has had a great impact on the psychological wellbeing of the child and his ability to feel good about himself and to fit into his environment.

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