

Using mindfulness to slow down in order to speed up progress for children with special needs

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Abstract

This paper defines mindfulness and mindfulness practices including ways to adapt age appropriate mindfulness practices for children in and out of the classroom. Emerging research on the effects of mindfulness practice for children is explored. This includes a discussion of several existing mindfulness programmes that are school-based including specific programmes to reduce anxiety or build compassion, as well as the work of psychologists and counsellors who have used mindfulness with children. When everyone in the classroom, students and teachers are open and aware and mentally present, this makes every moment in the classroom a learning opportunity, a special moment. Finally, this paper proposes that adapting mindfulness practices for children may assist children with special needs, promoting sustainable changes for an inclusive environment for all children in which they can slow down to speed up progress in academic, physical and social/emotional domains.

When we can focus our attention and are conscious of each moment (such as being actually aware of our driving, the traffic, the other drivers and the scenery), experiencing it without making judgements, we slow down. We expand our awareness and knowledge of ourselves, others, and our surroundings. Mindfulness teaches us to be totally aware, in each moment, non-judgementally (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; May, 2006). Kabat-Zinn's research, discussed throughout this paper, is based on numerous studies at the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center, with various colleagues beginning in 1979. These studies have been influential in this field, and can be considered very reliable. Data analysis was based on specific medical tests as well as self reporting over time.

Engagement in mindfulness practices focuses attention on the mind/body connection, thoughts and feelings without getting caught up in them while also expressing compassion for others. These mind/body connections trigger the specific way we pay attention, our present moment awareness which affects our body and brain function, mental health, thoughts, feelings and relationships (Siegel, 2007). Mindfulness helps us to become more conscious and more involved in our moment to moment activities and more aware, enhancing personal development as well as teacher's opportunities to meet individual needs for students. Students slow down, calm down, are more in the moment, and are less judgemental. One way to introduce mindfulness practices to children is by integrating mindfulness with the creative arts such as visual art, drama and music. Using simple instructions and ending with a debriefing session is important (Semple & Lee, 2008).

Different individuals respond at different rates to these interventions, but over time, may be more open to learning, less anxious and can concentrate more and for longer periods of time. Langer (1989) confirms this notion and suggests that through the practice of mindfulness, individuals can improve their confidence and awareness. The relationship between the student and the teacher, as well as the relationship between the student and what they are learning, are enhanced through mindfulness (Langer, 1997). As Langer's findings are based on many years of studies she has completed with various colleagues using mostly quantitative tools, her suggestions from her research have good reliability and credibility.

The seven principles of mindfulness (May, 2006, pp. 6-11) include:

- being non-judgemental of self, others and events as they occur
- cultivating patience with yourself and others
- enjoying the beauty and newness of each moment
- trusting in yourself and your own feelings
- paying attention to what is rather than striving for something else
- accepting things as they are and
- letting go.

By engaging in activities that promote mindfulness, and thus build one's abilities with the seven principles above, stress may also be reduced. Ultimately, children with special needs may, as a result, respond more quickly to interventions outlined in their Individual Education Plans (IEPs).

Mindfulness practices

Focused attention, starting with the breath and then the body, is often used to establish mindfulness practices, usually through the *body scan* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990, 2003; May, 2006). Additional exercises include a *sitting meditation* (Kabat-Zinn, 1990; May 2006) which draws attention to the breath and the body as in the *body scan*, followed by awareness of feelings and thoughts, then letting go of the attachment of the mind to any particular focus.

Mindfulness practice promotes consciousness of the mind/body connection (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kepler, 2000) increasing the potential to build learning capacity.

Mindful eating (Kabat-Zinn, 2003) is a type of meditation which concentrates on the process of eating, particularly noting sensory perceptions. *Mindful walking*, being mindful of each step and the entire process of walking both in mind and body, and *mindful stretching* (similar to some yoga poses) are key practices of mindfulness in action (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; May, 2006). The main components of these mindfulness exercises includes: focused attention in the moment without judgement, visualisation, and the building of compassion.

Semple and Lee (2008) offer further mindfulness practices that extend this focussed attention to:

- mindful listening especially with various types of music,
- mindful seeing similar to Elwyn Richardson's teaching method of focused observing and then drawing described in *Into a Further World* (Richardson, 2001),
- mindful touching which is especially good for teaching to describe how not to be judgemental, and
- mindful smelling.

Engaging children with mindfulness

The practices reviewed above can be initiated within the classroom as a morning focus activity and/or just after any outside breaks to return to study. Engaging in visualisations of success can be very helpful before participating in any new situation, difficult activity or test. Starting very slowly by introducing only one practice at a time over several days and for only limited time up to a few minutes will help teachers and students as they begin to feel more comfortable with these practices.

The language used by teachers when giving instructions for these activities is very important; teachers may experience negative reactions from parents and children from words like “mindfulness” and “meditation”. Using terms such as “improving focus”, “slowing down”, “calming down” and “stress reduction techniques”, and noting the benefits will sit better with parents.

O’Brien, Larson, and Murrell (2008), basing their research on their own work with children and those of other teachers and counsellors, note that since mindfulness calls for a “beginner’s mind” that it is particularly suitable for children as they have not developed so many preconceived ideas and judgements. Children have less baggage and may be more comfortable with new experiences. From their work with individuals and groups of children, O’Brien, Larson, and Murrell (2008), suggest adjusting language appropriately, shortening meditations to three to five minutes repeated several times throughout an entire session to accommodate shorter attention spans; and working with parents to create a whole family experience helping parents to see the child’s perspective. Semple and Lee (2008) following their six week study with 25 children concur that by practicing with children at home; parents enhance the beneficial effects of mindfulness for children.

To increase the benefits further, teachers and others who work with children may gradually, introduce more activities, extend the exercises for longer periods of time, and encourage children to integrate mindfulness into their daily lives especially during school lessons. Every day and every individual child is different so each individual teacher will need to decide the appropriate amount of practice for their students. Moment by moment awareness of the requirements of children with special needs will be important. When working with individuals with special needs, teachers will need to be very aware of the reactions of the children, and respond accordingly. A child may benefit from 30 seconds to one minute of mindfulness several times throughout the day depending on the situation.

Hayes and Greco (2008) remind us that work with adults in the area of mindfulness has a long history, but is relatively new in counselling and teaching children. Their data is derived from self reports by children, and therefore, for further reliability, there is a need for further reports from parent and teacher to confirm the conclusions drawn as well as including particular tests to demonstrate anxiety reduction. The seven challenges for those using mindfulness with children culminated from their own work with children listed below, are helpful for teachers:

1. ensuring content and activities are age appropriate
2. dealing with the issues of children’s limited verbal skills and the fact that children have generally been taught problem solving skills and rules that have a future orientation whereas mindfulness focuses on the moment
3. understanding that parents generally do not practice mindfulness so children are learning a way of feeling emotions in a different way, but not avoiding them

4. identifying and assessing mindful teaching and parenting and the environments in which children are learning mindfulness
5. creating an environment and culture that accepts mindfulness; concern over parent complaints
6. relating to other programmes already in place
7. and determining which children mindfulness best suits.

Extending mindfulness to classroom pedagogy

The benefits of engaging in mindfulness are further enhanced when teachers extend mindfulness to their pedagogical practices through mindful learning. In mindful learning, teachers and students understand that there is more than one perspective, seek new information and are open to possibilities while engaged in co-constructing learning (Langer, 1997). The key principles of mindful learning are outlined below and will help beginning teachers develop a variety of activities that promote mindful learning.

Mindful learning debunks the following seven myths of teaching

1. The basics must be learned so well that they become second nature
2. Paying attention means staying focussed on one thing at a time
3. Delaying gratification is important
4. Rote memorisation is necessary
5. Forgetting is a problem
6. Intelligence is knowing “what’s out there”
7. There are right and wrong answers (Langer, 1997, p. 2).

By incorporating the principles of mindfulness and revolving our pedagogy around the realisation that the above myths are not true, Langer (1997) has demonstrated in a number of studies, that enhanced student learning is made possible. Langer (1989, 1997) suggests “conditional teaching” leads to mindful learning and greater retention of information; concepts are shared as conditional (*it might be*) or tentative rather than *this is the exact way*, requiring deeper thinking for students. This type of mindful learning, is an underpinning feature of the New Zealand Ministry of Education’s Numeracy Project (2005), as students are asked to use their own strategies to solve mathematics problems, and teachers share strategies that *might* be helpful to find answers. Siegel (2007) agrees that use of this conditional presentation of information (*this may or may not be; this might be rather than this is...*), deepens learning potential.

To promote inclusion of all children, including those with special needs such as ADHD, Asperger’s Syndrome, mental health issues such as anxiety and depression, it might be helpful for teachers to include these mindfulness activities which build focussed awareness activities, visualisation exercises and anxiety reduction activities to help children slow down. The five key competencies, key tenets of the New Zealand Curriculum, are: thinking; managing self; understanding language, symbols and texts; relating to others; and participating and contributing (Ministry of Education, 2007). Addressing these key competencies is critical within teaching pedagogy in New Zealand; it is my contention that when mindfulness is practiced by teachers in both their personal and pedagogical practice, students achieve more, including students with special needs who improve their thinking skills, self awareness and abilities in the other key competencies.

Kaiser Greenland (nd), founder of the InnerKids Foundation in Los Angeles, has worked with inner city school children in Los Angeles for several years and has observed that the children who practice mindfulness have a felt-sense of balance, a calm, focussed mind and are creative and compassionate. Children have a clearer idea of what they want to do, set goals more easily and desire to make a positive impact in the world. Although this information is anecdotal based on professional experience, Kaiser Greenland and others have begun some testing of children to support their findings (Flook, Smalley, Kitil, Cho, Kaiser-Greenland, Locke, & Kasari, 2008).

Mindfulness, ADHD and Aspergers Syndrome

Increased focus and reduced anxiety might suggest that mindfulness would be helpful for people with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). Langer and Kaplan (1998) believe that to assist students with ADHD, actually increasing novelty through mindfulness and mindful learning practices, will reduce distraction and increase focus. Langer (1997) based on extensive research through several long range studies, suggests specific mindful learning practices that can help reduce distraction and increase focus include creating new categories, being open to new perspectives and new information.

Mindfulness meditation was introduced to both twenty-four adult and eight adolescents with ADHD, to improve their ability to control attention and emotion by focussing attention on the events of present moment, being open and interested in whatever is presented (Zyklowska, Ackerman, Yang, Futrell, Horton, Hale, Pataki, & Smalley, 2008). Improvements were noted by participants in attention span and cognitive inhibition as well as a reduction in anxiety and depression. Zylowska, et al (2008), believe that mindfulness meditation not only has a positive effect on attention but also improves metacognition, inhibition, and working memory enriching the regions of the brain affected. Further, these authors suggest that by focussing on your breath, body sensations, feelings and thoughts as you do with mindfulness, that the mind is drawn away from emotions that distract attention and learning, but a larger sample is needed.

Mitchell (2009), in his personal account, explores how mindfulness has helped him to embrace his behaviours that come from living with Asperger's Syndrome. He discusses how mindfulness practice has helped him to balance concentration with attending to the task at hand so his mind is not muddled with the intense focus. He is able to notice when he is feeling frustrated and anxious so that he does not devolve into an all consuming anger and lose "in the moment" focus. Mindfulness unlocks open mindedness and gives "mind energy" (p. 125). Mindfulness techniques have helped him to become more self-disciplined, avoid becoming fixated on fear and to set appropriate goals to address his obsessive compulsive nature. In addition, this slowing down has helped him learn to understand social rules and bring clarity to his thoughts (Mitchell, 2009). Although a personal success, this has implication for others and for extended research.

In their review of children with attention problems or anxiety disorders, Semple and Lee, (2008) noted that their clients found relief through mindfulness because children with anxiety disorders often have obsessed attention with the past or the future and may have difficulty shifting attention away from a particular problem or issue. This changed way of thinking to a focus on the present moment prevents both children and adults from getting stuck in automatic pilot, permitting them to be more able to meet the challenges of each moment.

Eisenberg, Sadovsky, and Spinrad (2005) discuss the importance of emotional regulation as a key influence on children's success in school including focus, motivation and academic competence. Understanding the self-regulation system in the brain, according to Rothbart and Posner (2005), is critical for the development of methods to assist children with ADHD and perhaps the development and success of all children in school. This convergence of thought strengthens the idea of including mindfulness programmes in schools and teacher training programmes.

Reduced anxiety

“Anxiety disorders are the most common mental health problems of childhood” (Semple & Lee, 2008, p. 64). These authors discuss a number of studies showing success for children with anxiety disorders when using mindfulness. Further, attention problems such as over-attention to the past or future contribute greatly to anxiety disorders so one reason mindfulness works so well is that it keeps children focussed on the present (Semple & Lee, 2008).

In an earlier study, conducted by Kabat-Zinn, Massion, Kristeller, Peterson, Fletcher, Pbert, Lenderking and Santorelli (1992), twenty out of twenty two participants, who attended an eight week mindfulness programme (one two hour session per week and a one day intensive), self-reported reductions in anxiety as well as lower scores on two tests measuring anxiety. A second group also had been trained to use mindfulness, though not in the original study, was also analysed and results of reduced anxiety were collaborated. Participants were pre and post tested on a variety of anxiety measures as well as re-tested three months later. “Patients are able to identify anxious thoughts as *thoughts*, rather than as “reality” (Kabat-Zinn, et al, 1992) which not only expands the field of focus but also helps reduce anxiety. Further study is suggested by Kabat-Zinn et al (1992) with a larger, randomised group so that mindfulness can be compared to a variety of behavioural therapies. Roemer and Orsillo (2009) confirm the effectiveness of using mindfulness with other behaviour therapies for children and adults with anxiety disorders as a way to deal with unpleasant thoughts and feelings to improve quality of life.

Wall (2005) describes another mindfulness-based programme working with middle school students (11-13 years old) in Boston. Students, 11-13 years old are more able to deal with more abstract concepts so were ready to comprehend information given for stress reduction that including tai chi and mindfulness exercises based on Kabat-Zinn and others. Again, although these are based on self reports, positive improvements in self awareness, sleep patterns and being less volatile or reactionary suggest that through these various studies that some collaboration of thought is emerging on positive effects.

How and why does it make a difference?

Self-regulation is controlled in the brain through emotions and thought patterns in the brain (Rothbart & Posner, 2005). Control over these emotions and patterns in the brain through self-regulation helps children balance emotional responses and reactivity so that cognitive engagement is not impeded (Blair & Diamond, 2008). Emotional response and cognitive control work together such that emotional engagement with content and low level stress can enhance understanding. Blair and Diamond (2008) conclude that enhanced control over stress and the emotions and patterns in the brain as part of self-regulation promote school readiness and success as children realise they can learn effectively, pay attention to class material, complete learning tasks and control their behaviour. Goleman (1997) would describe this as social/emotional literacy or intelligence. Scientific controlled experimental mindfulness programme research has shown improvements in emotional control and self-regulation (Brown, Roderick, Lantieri, & Aber, 2004), confirming the importance of using mindfulness with children with special needs.

Goleman (2008) discusses the results of a meta-analysis of over 100 studies of social emotional intelligence collated by the Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL) showing positive gains for students in and out of the classroom when

engaged in a social/emotional learning programme such as mindfulness. Not only did students learn to calm down and improved their interpersonal relationships, but academic growth was evident with 14 percentile points higher on achievement tests than those not participating in social/emotional learning programmes (Goleman, 2008). He correlates this with enhancing the development of the child's brain circuitry; especially the prefrontal cortex where emotional impulse control and paying attention are centred which is continuing to develop throughout childhood. Thus, by reducing stress and improving attention, Goleman (2008) notes that children have greater learning capabilities. Siegel (2008), from the UCLA Mindfulness Research Center agrees in an interview podcast on Profiles in Caring on Good Tube discussing how mindfulness can work with two to three year olds due to the developing prefrontal cortex.

In another controlled research study using the ANT, *Attention Network Test* (Rueda, Fan, Mc Candliss, Halparin, Gruber, Lercari, & Posner, 2004), Jha, Krompinger, & Baime (2007), note improvements for participants to support the idea that mindfulness training builds both concentrative (specific focus) and receptive (in the present moment experience) attention. Siegel (2007) notes that by associating mindfulness with improved neural pathways and brain activation in the prefrontal cortex, improving self regulation and awareness, wider acceptance of mindfulness awareness practices (MAP) will be gained. These more scientific, quantitative studies help to validate the self reports of positive benefits for children strengthening the argument for the use of mindfulness for children with a variety of special needs.

Descriptions of some current programmes

Lantieri's inner resilience programmes sprung up from the need to assist children who had lived through 9/11 in Manhattan, New York. Her research focussed on a large group of children, sixty participants, in experimental and control groups producing some encouraging, reliable preliminary findings (2008). Stress reduction using mindfulness techniques to quiet the mind, calm the body and identify and manage emotions became the goals for this programme. Lantieri (2008) notes that mindfulness quiets the chatter in our brains, slows us down so that we can meet daily challenges and are able to focus on one thing at a time which also enhances children's learning potential.

Wellness Works provides support for children and adolescents in mindfulness in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. Key goals of this programme include building mental competencies for improved awareness, concentration and problem solving skills. There is a strong emphasis on the mind/body connection through mindful movement (Kinder, 2008). Teachers completed behaviour rubrics developed by *Wellness Works* after ten fifty minute mindfulness sessions, and noted an overall 73% improvement in mental, emotional, physical and social competencies (Kinder 2008a). Programme evaluations, completed by students and teachers confirmed these results which were duplicated in three other settings and the Lancaster County Youth Intervention Center (Kinder, 2008). Currently, *Wellness Works* is engaged in collaborative research with Dr. Cheryl Desmond, from Millersville University in Pennsylvania, looking at the effects on primary and secondary students with special needs has been implemented with secondary school students with autism and other in special classes for emotional and learning support (Kinder, March/April 2009). Professional development in mindfulness practices is being provided for special education teachers as well (Kinder, January/February 2009). Teacher reports add credence to the argument in favour of this type of intervention for children in crisis.

A programme to develop mindfulness focussing on improvement in attention is discussed by Napoli, Rock Krech and Holley (2005). Key features similar to MBSR were included such as: body scan, focus on breath, mindful movement and sensorimotor activities. Three different measures of attentional awareness showed significant differences in favour of the students who have received the mindfulness training compared to the control group. Other ancillary benefits (Napoli, Rock Krech, & Holley, 2005) included decrease in test anxiety, fewer behaviour issues noted by the teacher and a reduction in teacher interventions with student behaviour so increased learning time.

Conclusion

This paper has discussed mindfulness and conclusions made by researchers at the Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Clinic and described key features and practices of mindfulness. Next, various suggestions for adapting mindfulness exercises for children were discussed, including extensions into classroom pedagogy. Following this was a discussion of some preliminary studies of children with ADHD and anxiety showing convincing promising initial results. The data from the research on the brain further supports the use of mindfulness noting positive effects on attention, self regulation and emotions. Programmes for children and the positive results experienced by various researchers using adapted versions of mindfulness across North America were highlighted; study in New Zealand would be useful. By adapting mindfulness techniques for children, a slowing down and focussing takes over, that enhances the participation of all students including those with special needs such as ADHD, Asperger's Syndrome and mental health issues.

Not only has this paper considered the importance of slowing down and focussing for children, but in addition, it has been pointed out that those who practice mindfulness consider compassion and being less judgemental to be priorities. This lays the foundation for sustainable positive changes within the world. Classrooms and schools where children and teachers engage in mindfulness together would promote inclusion and positive outcomes in stress reduction and improved attention for all.

Research in the area of mindfulness with adults is very extensive and has been collected over several decades through studies with individuals, small and large groups of participants using a variety of reporting instruments and tests. The research with children is emerging, but shows collaboration of results from various studies suggesting that there may be some benefits. Using other measurements beyond self reports has provided further reliability and validity (Napoli, Rock Krech, & Holley, 2005; Kinder, 2008a; Stewart Lawlor, 2005; Stewart Lawlor, Fischer, & Schonert-Reichl, 2006). Stewart Lawlor's research includes reductions in stress cortisol levels after introducing children to mindfulness.

The positive results from these studies are encouraging, but often rely on self reports from children, suggest further research using quantitative as well as qualitative measures is needed over longer periods of time. Although most of the studies with children have been descriptive in nature and reported from the author's personal practice or quoting the practice of others, the results do show reduction in anxiety, slowing down for better focus for children with ADHD and the possibilities for greater learning with more focussed attention.

These preliminary positive results, the long history of research with adults, and my own personal interest in finding ways to help children reduce anxiety to increase learning, has led me to my own interest in research in mindfulness in the classroom. As a lecturer in initial

teacher education, I have included mindfulness practices in all of my classes. Graduates who are interested in this field of research, will keep join me in collaborative research to explore whether using mindfulness to discover helps them deal with the stresses of the first six months as a beginning teacher. Will mindfulness help them gain self efficacy as a beginning teacher? With so many teachers leaving the profession early on, this research might be a beneficial component for mentoring programmes and hopefully keep teachers on the job.

As there is still a significant gap in the literature addressing the effects of mindfulness with children in general and those with specific special need, my research with these beginning teachers may extend to studies of the effects on children within their classrooms, especially those with special needs when mindfulness becomes a regular part of the curriculum. Further research with children with different kinds of special needs would also enhance the research in this field.

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