

Mindfulness for students and the adults who lead them

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School administrators have complex jobs. Mindfulness offers strategies and practices to help leaders manage and care for themselves, so they can manage and care for others.

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Mindfulness has been spreading like wildfire for a number of years. An internet search shows more than 75 million hits for “mindfulness,” 35 million hits for “mindfulness in education” and 700,000 hits for “mindfulness for education leaders.”

What was once an unknown concept and practice for many people in the western hemisphere has grown to a movement affecting organizations from Sesame Street to Wall Street. Companies such as MindUp, founded by Goldie Hawn, and Mindful Schools based in Emeryville, Calif., offer school and district-wide training programs, and curriculums to promote mindfulness in schools. Both groups report to have reached close to 1 million students with their mindfulness programs.

While the value of mindfulness in schools has been studied and written about, less has been researched about mindfulness and school leaders. What is mindfulness, where did it come from, and what are the implications for educational leadership?

Mindfulness: Thousands of years in practice

Although it is often associated with eastern religions, the importance of mindfulness has long been recognized in western cultures. William James in his book “Principles of Psychology,” published in 1890, wrote: “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character, and will... An education which should improve this faculty would be the education par excellence (quintessential). But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical instructions for bringing it about.”

The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines mindfulness as, “the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one’s thoughts, emotions or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis.”

The four foundations of mindfulness are:

- Mindfulness of body.
- Mindfulness of feelings.
- Mindfulness of thoughts.
- Mindfulness of phenomena, or how we interact with the world around us.

Mindfulness can be practiced using a variety of techniques, such as visualization, intentional breathing, yoga, muscle relaxation and meditation. It can be done individually or in a group, and be part of a short term or ongoing program.

Interest in mindfulness burgeoned in the 1960s and '70s as a result of popular and professional attention. In 1975, Dr. Herbert Benson, a Harvard physician, studied meditation and the effect on stress. His findings, published in his book “The Relaxation Response,” indicated that daily mindfulness practices, including breathing techniques, progressive muscle relaxation, meditation or visualization, can be helpful in reducing stress and related reactions, such as anxiety disorders.

In 1979 Professor Jon Kabat-Zinn of the University of Massachusetts Medical Center developed a program called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR). Originally used to augment pain management, MBSR and mindfulness practices were shown to benefit many life and work factors, including emotional regulation, enhanced attention and reduced stress.

Daniel Goleman coined the term “emotional intelligence” (EI) in his seminal book of the same name, and in a 1998 article for the Harvard Business Review cited the benefits of EI in the workplace. Among his findings, he concluded that good leaders are distinguished by a high degree of emotional intelligence.

Mindfulness in schools on the rise

Success in school requires the use of executive functions such as attention, memory and impulse control. These neurodevelopmental abilities, which mature over time, can be positively or negatively affected by genetic (nature) or environmental (nurture) factors.

Teachers quickly recognize those students who need to improve their ability to attend, self-regulate, and manage the demands of a class environment. The practice of mindfulness has shown promise in providing students with skills to increase self-management of cognitive and emotional functioning related to school success.

The positive effect of mindfulness practices on learning and school functioning has been extensively studied. An overview of research examining the effects of mindfulness programs in education (Campbell, 2014) reported positive results in improving anxiety management, reducing stress and improving social skills in students. Participants in the studies reported increased feelings of self-acceptance and improved self-regulation when practicing mindfulness.

Amy Saltzman, M.D., in collaboration with the Department of Psychology at Stanford, studied the effects of mindfulness practices with fourth through seventh graders and their parents. The results showed that after one hour of mindfulness training for eight consecutive weeks, the children demonstrated increased ability to orient their attention, as measured by an attention network test.

Researchers from Oxford and University College London are currently studying the long-term effects of mindfulness training in schools. According to an interview with Dr. Matthew Brensilver, program director of Mindful Schools (personal communication, Oct 3, 2017), the Mindful Schools program has been used with more than 750,00 students nationally and internationally.

Dr. Brensilver suggested that schools previously exposed to social-emotional learning programs tend to be more open to mindfulness training. He stated, "The intrinsic curiosity of teachers lends itself to interest in mindfulness."

Some well known researchers have voiced concerns about the mindfulness craze. In an article entitled “Don’t Believe the Hype,” contributing editor Linda Heuman interviewed Dr. Catherine Kerr, a neuroscientist studying meditation at Brown University. Dr. Kerr stated that increased media reports often seemed to cherry pick studies with positive results. She called for a more balanced review of the science behind mindfulness.

Jon Kabat-Zinn in a recent panel discussion at the New York Society for Ethical Culture discussed the future of mindfulness and worried that the explosion of programs would result in “watered down” versions lacking scientific rigor. Mindfulness like all evidence-based programs, requires intentionality and commitment to fidelity to be successful.

Managing the school environment

School administrators have complex jobs. Research has found that principals commonly report high levels of stress related to the competing demands in meeting the educational, social and emotional needs of students and staff. Principals are frequently presented with new and unexpected issues that compete for their time and attention. Technology, gender identity and equity are recent examples.

Jerome T. Murphy, the former dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Education, has written about the challenges of educational leadership. He reported that more than 80 percent of administrators he polled expressed feeling overwhelmed, stressed and self critical about their performance.

In an article called the “Leadership Trap,” he wrote: “At its heart, the leadership trap is this: To shine as a leader, you seek to control your distressing thoughts and emotions in order to steer clear of feeling (and looking) weak. Running away, suppressing your feelings, and hiding are common methods of control. Yet the more you struggle to control your insides, it turns out the more you undermine your outsides – your ability to build trust and take charge as a leader. The more you bury your stress, for instance, the more stressed and reactive you become.”

Caryn Wells, writing in the September 2013 NASSP Bulletin, reported on the increasing stress that principals experience related to heightened expectations for student achievement. She recommended mindfulness

practices as a way of managing the tension and related stress in school administration.

Just as parents manage and set the emotional tone in a family, the school administrator manages and influences the emotional tone or climate in their school. School leaders become the “holding environment” for upset, anxiety and frustration associated with challenging situations.

The task of responding to daily needs of students and staff while taking care of oneself requires skills that are not typically part of an administrative credentialing training program. Mindfulness offers strategies and practices to help administrators manage and care for themselves so they can manage and care for others.

Mindfulness and emotional intelligence

The importance of understanding relationships in organizations has long been recognized. The Tavistock Institute of Social Relations has been studying methods of improving human relations in organizations since 1947. The group focuses on the often-unconscious factors that affect how people react to factors such as authority, age or gender in the workplace.

Tavistock offers leadership training programs to assist individuals in gaining awareness and insight in order to improve work relations and effectiveness. One participant in a workshop reflected, “I realize that the principle benefit of the support I receive is to provide me with thinking time and the discipline of treating that thinking time as a priority because of the leadership challenges I face in my role. “These insights would be impossible to acquire without the benefit of skills, professional judgment and experience that is available through the coaching.

“I sometimes wonder how often people find time in busy schedules to think about the strategic issues they face individually and organizationally. I suspect only a minority would answer affirmatively. At times, dealing with complex organizational choices on a daily basis makes me break into a sweat.”

The work of Daniel Goleman, author of “Emotional Intelligence,” has emphasized the importance of awareness in recognizing one’s own feelings and the feelings of others in order to manage emotions and

relationships. Emotional intelligence is an important theme in the Leadership Coaching programs sponsored by ACSA, and referenced in “Blended Coaching,” by Gary Bloom, and “Evocative Coaching,” by Megan Tschannen Moran.

Bloom writes, “As important as professional knowledge and skills are, it is no secret that school leaders often fail not because they lack brains, determination, knowledge or skills, but because of what is often characterized as ‘style’ or ‘people skills.’” Tschannen Moran includes listening “attentively, mindfully and openly” as critical skills in building trust, expanding understanding and gaining insights in supporting school leaders.

An informal survey I conducted with leadership coaches showed 75 percent agreeing that although daily mindfulness practice is difficult it would be beneficial to school leaders and students. All surveyed felt that mindfulness practices would add to positive relationships between administrators and staff members.

In my work as a leadership coach, I often hear administrators report on the emotional challenges presented by students, staff or families. As I listen to their stories, one question I always ask is “How do you take care of yourself?” I hear the different strategies but no reference to mindfulness techniques or practices.

Administrators are pressed to use their emotional intelligence to listen, empathize and respond to issues that often have no “right” answer. While most administrators rise to the countless challenges in a school day, the job can be taxing and leave individuals feeling exhausted, overwhelmed, and in some cases, burnt out.

Mindfulness for schools and school leaders

Mindfulness programs in schools are growing, and research supports the benefits for students, staff and overall school climate. In 2014 Lidia Tilahun, M.A., and Lucy Vezzuto, Ph.D., compiled a document for the Orange County Department of Education Instructional Services Division, titled “Mindfulness Practice in K-12 Schools: Emerging Research on Stress, Well Being and Achievement.”

In a review of the research they reported that factors essential to learning and school engagement such as attention, emotional regulation and social functioning could be improved with mindfulness practices. Studies cited also reported that teachers practicing mindfulness showed lower levels of stress and burnout.

The degree to which schools can access programs for mindfulness will vary according to needs and resources. Although mindfulness practices can benefit all learners, the skills acquired can be most beneficial to those students requiring Tier 2 and Tier 3 interventions.

The Rockland County, N.Y. Board of Cooperative Educational Services received a \$1.2 million grant in 2015 from the U.S. Department of Education to pilot a program incorporating mindfulness for students with severe emotional disabilities. Mindful Schools in Emeryville offers financial assistance to school districts in need, and reports that it has trained teachers in all 50 states, helping more than 750,000 students.

Adding new programs in a school is a process that requires engagement and support of all stakeholders. Mindfulness practices can be part of a daily routine and after time can become a more natural habitual way of being. The positive effects benefit learning, behavior and overall well-being. Developing habits take time and intention and the prospect of adding “one more thing” to an educator’s schedule can meet with resistance.

James Clear is an author who writes about the science of self-improvement and suggests that new habits have a greater chance of sticking when they are added to already established routines. He uses the term “habit stacking” to describe this process. Most schools have programs that support social and emotional growth for students. Frameworks such as the Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) offer a model and guidelines for incorporating complementary programs within a school system.

Educators become administrators for various reasons. A common theme is a passion for learning and improvement and a belief that they can lead others in the right direction. As the saying goes “It is lonely at the top,” and many administrators once in the job find themselves isolated as they shoulder the ongoing responsibilities.

The natural tendency to avoid appearing weak can reinforce the isolation and increase the stress of leadership impacting productivity and well-being.

Guides to mindfulness practices are readily accessible and can lighten the load of school leaders. Mindfulness is best understood by practice, and leaders who model mindfulness will have greater buy-in from staff and students. Valerie Brown and Kristen Olson (2015) provide excellent detailed descriptions of mindfulness exercises for school leaders that are easy to learn.

Schools are dynamic systems of growth that reflect the changes and challenges of a fast-moving world. Educators and school leaders are increasingly tasked with addressing multiple issues beyond learning that affect student and adult performance.

Students from diverse backgrounds often come to school lacking attention and self-regulation skills, while adults desire a greater degree of empathy and understanding while at work. Interpersonal interactions that are inherent in collaboration require greater emotional intelligence for students and staff alike.

Children living in a world of “stimulation on steroids” have the greatest need to hardwire habits that can quiet their brains, calm their senses and allow them to grow and learn at their highest level.

Mindfulness has proven benefits for the physical, emotional and cognitive well being of students and educators. It can contribute to and help sustain positive school climates. The benefits of mindfulness and emotional intelligence are associated with successful school leadership.

In some ways the increased popularity of mindfulness may reflect a decrease in recognizing those factors that are related to a well-balanced life. In contrast to our Gross National Product index that measures abundance of goods and services, the country of Bhutan has a Gross National Happiness index that measures psychological well-being, health, time use, education, cultural diversity and resilience as factors of a good life. That sounds like something to be mindful about.

Resources

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