MINDFULNESS FOR STUDENTS, TEACHERS AND PARENTS OF PUBLIC SCHOOLS (COMMUNITY BASED APPLICATION)

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Abstract

Developing healthy habits of mind through managing emotions and being able to recognize, accept and let go thoughts that put the person in a ruminating mode is something very important to stay healthy and experience well being. Mindfulness can provide a base for that. Besides, developing a healthy mind through the practice of Mindfulness improves the ability to develop empathy and compassion too.

A state of well-being is the optimal condition for doing well in school: a pupil experiencing a state of well-being is more responsive to learning; a pupil who can feel empathy for his companions can be valuable in creating good dynamics in class. That's why promoting techniques such as Mindfulness at school can be useful to improve the results of children at school, as well as preparing them for the future challenges of life.

However, it seems to us that treating children with Mindfullness is not enough, and we think that to make a really effective intervention parents and teachers should be taken into account too. Namely, the thesis we want to develop in the present paper is that an intervention on school age children is much more effective if their families are introduced into the Mindfulness philosophy as well and their teachers too, in what we define a community based approach.

Keywords: mindfulness, school, education, community, society.

1 INTRODUCTION

Developing healthy habits of mind through managing emotions and being able to recognize, accept and let go thoughts that put oneself in a ruminating mode is something very important to stay healthy and experience well being. Mindfulness can provide a base for that. Besides, developing a healthy mind through the practice of Mindfulness improves the ability to develop empathy and compassion too. Furthermore, a state of well-being is the optimal condition for doing well in school: a pupil experiencing a state of well-being is more responsive to learning; a pupil who can feel empathy for his companions can be valuable in creating good dynamics in class. For this reason, we think it is appropriate to promote the learning of techniques such as Mindfulness at school.

Several experimentation in this sense have been carried on in the last years: in the 2011-12 school year, for instance, Mindful Schools partnered with the University of California, Davis to conduct one of the largest randomized-controlled studies to date on mindfulness and children, involving 937 children and 47 teachers in 3 Oakland public elementary schools. The outcomes of such a study are reported in http://www.mindfulschools.org/about-mindfulness/research/. A mention is due to many other studies about Mindfulness in Education: see the references for further informations. Buiding on those studies, as well as on our personal experience, during the past three years we have been experimenting in schools in Barcelona. Following these trials, we realized that introducing children to Mindfullness can be a big opportunity, but parents and teachers should be taken into account too as part of the solution. Namely, the thesis we want to develop in the present paper is that an intervention on school age children is much more effective if their families are introduced into the Mindfulness philosophy as well and their teachers too, in what we define a community based approach.

In fact, we are convinced that it is at school but also at home and in any relationship that children learn how to develop these healthy habits. Therefore, it is very important that parents know how to perform this function at home. In this way, parents grow the capacity to be a healthy mirror for their children, as well as taking care of their own minds. The same argument can be applied to teachers, who spend long hours with children. They need to know how to handle situations in which emotions come into play and managing them is crucial. Moreover, they need to expand the attitude of listening to others, having compassion toward others and respecting others. All that together will lead to a good example
to be taken by the children, and will result in a significantly greater impact on the children and on the society as a whole.

The paper is structured as follows. In Section 2 we describe the methodology of our study. More precisely, in subsection 2.1 we give, for the reader’s convenience, an account of what Mindfulness is and how it has been developed. Then, after having stated in detail our objective in Section 2.2, we describe in Section 2.3 the methodology we followed in our 2016/17 trial. Section 3 provides the results of this study. Finally, further developments are outlined in Section 4.

2 METHODOLOGY

This section, after providing a quick glance at what Mindfulness is, describes in details the trial we carried out during the current school year 2016/17, in the school Mercè Rodoreda in Barcelona.

2.1 Mindfulness in pills

The Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program was developed in 1979 by Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn at the Medical Centre at the University of Massachusetts. MBSR was the first program based on Mindfulness, a meditation practice whose origins lay in the Buddhist tradition. Mindfulness has a strong relation with the Vipassana and the Zen meditation, both representing the “here and now” philosophy. It is about observing things as they are, not as they seem to be.

According to Jon-Kabat-Zinn:

“Mindfulness is awareness that arises through paying attention, on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgementally,” says Kabat-Zinn. “It’s about knowing what is on your mind.”

After the MBSR, other Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have been developed, based on strong scientific research done through 38 years until now.

Mindfulness is a tool that targets the nervous system. It helps transform our beliefs system and the way we see things based on our past experiences. This is most of the time the cause of stress because we tend to react instead of respond to situations and we do not have the calm and wisdom needed to take sound decisions based on data that is not arising from distorted information created by our minds.

Fig. 1, taken from the website https://mindfulnessinschools.org/, clearly summarizes the keypoints with Mindfulness: first of all, mindfulness aim is to teach us to cope with situations we do have to face, without ruminating about if they are good or bad for us; then, regular practice of mindfulness definitely changes our brain, and such changes are proven by serious brain images studies. Good news, up to now. However, it is important to note that these benefits are obtained through a regular practice of basic exercises, which is maintained over time. Practising regularly is not as easy, as the writers can assure. Nevertheless, once one perceives the benefits, he gets much more motivated to insert mindfulness practice in his diary routine: mindfulness helps you to think more clearly, to feel calmer, less anxious and less depressed. This in turn leads you to learn more effectively and to perform better, whatever the task you are engaged in.

Mindfulness classes are centered more in experience rather then on theoretical statements: you are guided to learn how to focus on whatever is happening around you, to perceive all that is part of you. Mindfulness practice teaches you to care about the unconscious operations of your body (like breathing), the sensation in your body (cold, hot, ...), your thoughts and your emotions (I'm sad, I'm angry, ...), ....

This results in an increased consciousness of your body - and your mind, provided that such a distinction can be made, and In an increased capacity to observe what happens without judging.

This naturally translates into a feeling of increased well-being that allows you to be more performing, since more "centered", whatever the task you are facing, from an exam at school to an interview for a job, from a discussion with friends to a quarrel with the partner.
What Is Mindfulness?

Mindfulness involves learning to direct our attention to our experience as it unfolds, moment by moment, with open-minded curiosity and acceptance. Rather than worrying about what has happened or might happen, it trains us to respond skilfully to whatever is happening right now, be that good or bad.

Brain imaging studies show that mindfulness practice reliably and profoundly alters the structure and function of the brain to improve the quality of thought, feeling and concern for others.

What's the point of mindfulness?
In adults, mindfulness training has been proven time and again to improve health and wellbeing. It also helps people of all ages to learn more effectively, think more clearly, perform better and to feel calmer, less anxious and less depressed. Mindfulness is now recommended by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence, and GPs are referring adults to 8 week courses that reduce stress and help prevent recurrent depression. It is increasingly being used in business to improve staff wellbeing and satisfaction, in sports training to improve performance, and with children and young people and in schools to enhance well-being and learning.

How do people learn mindfulness?
Mindfulness is always learned in a highly practical way, through experience rather than talk. We gradually learn to direct our attention in a more focused way to whatever is actually happening - whether it be our breathing, the sensations in our body, thoughts and feelings, or everyday activities such as walking and eating.

Is it difficult?
At first the mind wanders constantly, but with practice we learn to sustain our attention and direct it more skilfully. This helps break the grip of unhelpful mental habits, judgements and impulses, making way for greater calm, and for more helpful, kinder and rational thinking about all aspects of life. However, this takes practice!

What Mindfulness IS
- A training in paying attention to experience as it happens
- A rigorously-researched treatment for anxiety and depression
- A way of enhancing well-being and performance
- Recommended by the National Institute of Clinical Excellence

Figure 1. What is mindfulness? from https://mindfulnessinschools.org/.
2.2 Objective of our trials

The long term objective of our team is to provide as many children as possible with the means and support for coping with their personal life changes and developments through Mindfulness. That is to say, our goal is to provide them with the training and the right tools to ensure solid progress in their personal and emotional development. By doing that, the objective is to raise children who are able to care for their own well-being and that of others, to perform better at school because they become more able to concentrate and improve their interrelations with others because of empathy and compassion improvement and increased capacity to control impulses or reactivity.

We would like to study the impact of only children having mindfulness vs. children and teachers, and both vs. children, teachers and parents and make a quantitative and qualitative assessment of this change, thinking in terms of empathy, compassion, kindness, concentration, reactivity, performance and stress level. In our last intervention in a school with students and teachers, we had the opportunity to introduce some of the families to Mindfulness too. The change we could observe was much bigger in these children whose parents were also taking Mindfulness than the ones who were not. This is why we decided that we wanted to study and measure the impact of only children and teachers having mindfulness vs. children, teachers and parents. Besides that, it was very difficult to enhance the practice of children if they didn’t have a follow-up at home. Mindfulness as a community matter, we think can have a much greater effect than just working with a part of this community.

This insight opened the chance to make a further study to determine how true this is and develop a tool to measure this change through Mindfulness in students, teachers and families.

2.3 Methodology of the 2016/17 trial

We describe in this subsection the methodology we followed in the school Mercè Rodoreda (Barcelona) during the past school year 2016/17, building on the trials we conducted in the same school in the two previous school years.

2.3.1 The school: motivations for the trial

The school where we introduced the Mindfulness practice is located in the underserved neighborhood of Nou Barris, Barcelona. It has 300 students and 20 teachers. The director of the school, Àngels Cadena, and her team had the need of introducing a tool or a practice that would allow them mainly to improve the emotional regulation of children. They felt it was necessary to teach children how to manage emotions, in order to decrease reactivity and reach a higher level of calm, to take sound decisions and do not react upon emotions. Being less reactive would allow them to get into less trouble and be conscious about their attitudes and able to transform them. At the same time, the level of calm and consciousness should allow them to perform better at school (meaning with that to be able to learn better, even if not necessarily to get better results).

We started the Mindfulness practice three years ago as a pilot project involving 4 classes. The results were very promising in terms of children being more calm as well as being able, for instance, to breathing and thinking instead of reacting in difficult situations. The director, Àngels Cadena, decided therefore to introduce it as a whole school practice.

2.3.2 From the only children approach to the children and teachers approach

Starting from the second year of trial, besides expanding the group of children having Mindfulness, we also decided to include the teachers. We were convinced that including the teachers would enhance the practice. In fact, if we would only introduce the children, they would not have had a reference for the practice. The risks about that would have been:

- If teachers were supposed to guide the children in this daily practice, they had, in the first place, to practice and integrate this practice in order to teach it. How could it work differently? If it is not a part of their daily life, feeling the benefits of it, how could they believe in its benefits and introduce it in class? Even if they would believe it is a good tool, how can someone teach something that does not understand and practice for a long time, having integrated it as a part of its own life?
- Mindfulness as a mere relax tool is one of the biggest risks of getting teachers teach it as a tool and not as something integrated in their daily life: the practice of Mindfulness does help oneself
to relax, but it is much more, and one cannot understand it unless one doesn't try it in one's daily life.

Therefore, we started to introduce teachers to the practice in special sessions expressly designed for them, as well as working with teachers and students in the sessions dedicated to the students. Namely, teachers did both kinds of session.

2.3.3 Time frame

The two different interventions, depending on the age, worked as follows:

1. The intervention with children took sixteen sessions of half an hour per session. It was done twice a week at school. Children were from 6-12 years old. Each week, they were given a Mindfulness practice to be done daily and some questions to be answered in a diary (based on Mindful Schools curriculum)

2. The intervention with adults (the teachers) took eight weeks. There was a weekly session of two and a half hours and they were given Mindfulness practices and exercises to be done every day (approximately one hour per day). Groups were of between 10 and 15 people.

Adults were given a stress test in week 2 and week 8 to see the change in their stress level.

The time frame for the intervention was then for children between two and three months, depending on free days, excursions and so on, while for adults it was of two months.

2.3.4 Parents come into play

Teachers started to report changes in the way they perceived the students, in the first place. Instead of seeing children as problems, they started understanding how having problems at home make them behave like they did. This was already a big improvement, as changing the way they see the children made it possible to find different solutions to the same problems they faced everyday. It also gave teacher a chance to behave in a more compassionate way, meeting the needs of the children more effectively.

Having introduced the students and teachers to the Mindfulness practice, parents started to wonder: “what is this our children are learning that seems to be working in their attitude at school? We may want to have this at home too”. Hence, we decided to start a program for parents too: 45 parents volunteered to go through an 8-week program, like the one teachers did. They were very happy to find out that, after the training, they were more able to listen to their children before reacting, therefore, more able to manage emotions in difficult situations. In turn, children were very happy and had a feeling of being listened to and understood by their parents. We remember one of them saying “my mother doesn’t scream now”.

3 RESULTS OF THE 2016/17 TRIAL

Since the beginning, in the first pilot trial, the results were very promising in terms of children being more calm as well as being able to breathing and thinking instead of reacting in difficult situations, for instance.

When we started working with teachers as well, they started to report changes in the way they perceived the students, in the first place. Instead of seeing children as problems, they would see little children having problems at home that would make them behave like they did. This was already a big swing, since changing the way they see the children makes it possible to find different solutions to the same problems they faced everyday. It also gives teacher a chance to behave in a more compassionate way meeting the needs of the children more effectively.

The comparison between the stress test they filled up at week 2 and the one they answered at week 8 highlighted how their stress levels had decreased even for these teachers who did not practice everyday but had practiced some days a week only.

The parents who volunteered for the 2016/17 trial reported full satisfaction with the results they got: they were very happy to find out that, after the training, they were more able to listen to their children before reacting, therefore, more able to manage emotions in difficult situations. In turn, children were very happy and had a feeling of being listened to and understood by their parents. We remember one of them saying “my mother doesn’t scream now”.

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4 CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER DEVELOPMENTS

The 2016/17 trial, which involved 300 children, 20 teachers and 45 parents, gave us the feeling that we were on the right way. Mindfulness as a community matter seemed to have a much greater effect than just working with a part of the community.

This insight opened the chance for us to make a study to determine how true this is and maybe develop a tool (test) to measure this change through Mindfulness in students, teachers and families.

For this study we have chosen a school in the neighborhood of Sardenya, in Barcelona. It is an underserved area too. The trial will be developed in the school year 2017/18, and will concern three classes with different age ranges (5-6 year old class, 7-8 year old class and 11-12 year old class).

In each class we will have three different groups of children. One group in which only students will go through the training and another group in which teachers and students will be given the training and the last group with parents, teachers and students taking the Mindfulness training. The rest of the students of the school will serve as ground zero control group, since they will not receive any kind of intervention.

The training will take two months for all of them, as explained earlier in subsection 2.3.3. The training will take place during schools hours for teachers and students and out of school hours for parents. But they all will be following the same path of learning.

The changes (or the lack of changes) in the participant's attitude will be monitored every 2 weeks by means of a stress test and a Mindfulness test.

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