

Article 79

Mindfulness in K–12 Education: School Counselor Connections

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Abstract

This paper provides an overview of the construct of mindfulness, specifically focusing on Langer's theory of mindfulness borne out of the positive psychology field. Citing literature, the author argues that mindfulness has appropriate application to the field of education with school counselors set for such implementation. Implications and recommendations are presented for both researchers and practicing school counselors.

Keywords: mindfulness, instruction, school counseling, Langer, education

As the increasing diversity of American K–12 public education recognizes more systemic factors influencing students and their academics (Aud et al., 2011; Hughes, Page, & Ford, 2011; Milam, Furr-Holden, & Leaf, 2010), educators continually struggle with removing potential negative biases that such influences may have on student perceptions towards academic achievement. Whether these challenges originate from external or internal sources, students wrestle with the cognitive/emotional consequences while attempting to successfully navigate K–12 education. Mindfulness, defined as a flexible, present-moment awareness (Gehart & McCollum, 2007; Langer, 2009; Nanda, 2009, 2010), has drawn considerable attention over time in the fields of medicine, counseling, and psychology. While we are witnessing attempts to research this topic and its effectiveness in school settings (Anglin, Pirson, & Langer, 2008; Carson, Shih, & Langer, 2001; Flook et al., 2010; Jennings, Foltz, Snowberg, Sim, & Kemeny, 2011), such investigations have not kept pace with the exponential growth of mindfulness interventions (Feagans Gould, Dariotis, Greenberg, & Mendelson, 2016; Jennings, 2016). More so, despite the integral role professional school counselors play assisting students (and more specifically, assisting students with social, emotional, and cognitive distress), to date few publications address the potential benefits of mindfulness interventions for use within comprehensive guidance and counseling programs (Tadlock-Marlo, 2011).

Mindfulness as both construct and intervention offers potential beyond sole academic intervention (e.g., where students' self-perceptions towards learning are freed from judgmental qualifiers). In alignment with school counselors' charge of fostering holistic student development (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2012) mindfulness appears robust enough to meaningfully address multiple student domains (e.g., academic, social/emotional, career) and thus warrants further investigation. Yet before application to school counseling activities can begin, a brief conceptual introduction is necessary.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness traces its roots from Eastern philosophy with life viewed as sufferings yielding opportunity for personal and, more specifically, spiritual growth (Carmody, 2009; Gehart & McCollum, 2007). Thus individuals who recognize this perspective and practice accepting or "letting go" of perceived control over such sufferings are "freed" to live a more fulfilling life (Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Nanda, 2009). However, rather than espousing a potentially fatalistic outlook dependent upon release of control (whether perceived or real), the Western tradition of mindfulness focuses on altering the relationship between individual and situation. Students facing life stressors or challenging situations need not accept a loss of control in order to progress and move forward; in essence, trading learned helplessness for promised inner peace. Instead, mindfulness facilitates and guides students to view the relationship between individual and situation from varying perspectives. Students retain a sense of personal control over the situation (i.e., where and how to view their relationship with the problem) even though they may have no direct influence on it. As one steps back from the present consequences of the problem (i.e., reflecting upon the various emotional, social, academic outcomes), mindfulness allows one to suspend judgment of the situation, the situation's consequences, as well as one's response to both of these. Even while experiencing debilitating effects (e.g., stress, anxiety, depression) "from" the problem, students' recognition and embodiment of the problem as distinct from self remains within their control.

Fostering Awareness

This focus on awareness of self and other may no doubt seem familiar with other avenues of K–12 educational research. Resonating with the constructs of cognitive psychology and social learning (Bruner, 1996; Vygotsky, 1998), mindfulness and mindfulness-based therapy call for connection with present experience in which there is suspension of judgment—where phenomenological description results from a "being with" awareness of multiple perspectives and descriptions (Nanda, 2010). More specifically, Langer's (2009) theory of mindfulness asserted that mindfulness "is a flexible state of mind—an openness to novelty, a process of actively drawing novel distinctions. When we are mindful, we become sensitive to context and perspective; we are situated in the present" (p. 214). Cognitive psychologists and educational theorists note similarities between Langer's mindfulness and Csikszentmihalyi's concept of optimal experience, or flow; however, mindfulness stands alone as its own construct. Shernoff and Csikszentmihalyi (2009), in their explanation of flow in the school setting,

described a distinct progression from self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997) to flow. Langer's theory demonstrates a similar evolution with its departure from Csikszentmihalyi. Whereas characterizations of flow theory might be "feeling in the zone," "zoning out," or "losing track of time," mindfulness is considered a heightened awareness. This awareness is not merely static observation, but wakeful sensitivity to the dynamic of the subject's actions with their surroundings (Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000).

Langer's construct has had wide application to various treatment models and interventions. Interestingly, mindfulness has additionally been employed within the field of education, investigating student states of mindfulness or (in less optimal settings) mindlessness (Langer, 1997). Here again, in terms of research, the construct of mindfulness builds and expands upon a foundation laid by flow theory.

Building Off of Flow Theory

Although the more established construct of flow continues to amass empirical evidence in the classroom setting, the need for a "next step" or advancement exists. In their study investigating high school student engagement in classrooms, Shernoff, Csikszentmihalyi, Schneider, and Steele Shernoff (2003) found increased student flow experience in individual and small group work settings (versus "traditional" lecturing); however, a major limitation of the study was its exclusion of the educator—a factor the authors themselves described as a "critical influence" (p. 173). Rathunde and Csikszentmihalyi (2005), in their causal comparative study of middle school students in both traditional and Montessori school settings, addressed the influence of educators. Steps towards mindfulness seem to be initiated as the researchers went about looking at how aware educators were in facilitating optimal student learning. However, while educators were included as influences on effective student learning (i.e., student flow), measurement did not focus on the educators themselves but rather solely on whether or not students "achieved" flow. This concern is remedied in the study by Basom and Frase (2004) as they looked at educators' states of flow. The authors voiced apprehension, noting the prominence and explosion of research regarding Csikszentmihalyi's flow theory when fewer than 10 studies exist directly looking at teacher flow. In their study, Basom and Frase employed an if → then logic to their methodology, suggesting that *if* a teacher is in a state of flow, *then* students are free to achieve flow as well. As the article ends, Basom and Frase cited the importance of intentional planning (e.g., in-depth lesson planning) and preparation as essential to achieving flow. Whereas the previous works perhaps hinted at the need for a new construct, Schweinle, Turner, and Meyer (2008) recognized the need for expanding research beyond studying flow alone. Reorienting themselves along the priorities of the schoolhouse, Schweinle et al. noted that achieving flow does not guarantee that the experience is "optimal," directly impacting or connecting with meaningful learning. While flow theory may have opened the K–12 educational doors to awareness, there still exist notable limitations.

Mindfulness in Classrooms

Departing from flow theory, Ciarrochi, Kashdan, Leeson, Heaven, and Jordan directly incorporated mindfulness into their 2011 longitudinal study of high school students. While their results suggested that mindfulness has a causal role in adolescent

well-being, the authors were cognizant of the limitations of their longitudinal study and called for further research to employ an experimental design. Working from a similar premise of adolescent well-being as foundational for meaningful learning, Schonert-Reichl and Lawlor's (2010) quasi-experimental study investigated the effect mindfulness has upon social emotional competence in fourth- through seventh-grade students. Analysis revealed statistically significant differences between groups. Students in classrooms utilizing mindful education (ME) instruction reported higher optimism than students in the control group. Similarly, a significant gender and intervention interaction effect revealed preadolescents experiencing increased self-confidence. Additionally, teachers assigned to the intervention ME group perceived their students as significantly more attentive, emotionally regulated, and socially/emotionally competent. While both studies provided value in furthering the application of mindfulness, their focus on social/emotional competence and student well-being arguably carries less weight (or different weight) than studies focusing on academic outcomes.

Focusing on the learning outcomes of mathematics instruction, Ritchhart and Perkins (2000) utilized a quasi-experimental design incorporating four different instructional techniques. Rather than constructing a dichotomous "mindful vs. mindless" experiment, Ritchhart and Perkins provided varying degrees of mindfulness within three interventions. The study found students receiving conditional (mindful) instruction had significantly higher accuracy scores than students in the control group. These findings provided encouraging affirmation for proponents of mindfulness and its use in education; however, the study's relatively small sample size ($n = 53$), consisting of female undergraduate students, presents a considerable limitation.

Carson, et al.'s (2001) quasi-experimental design study provided an example of mindfulness in education with students in grades 3–5. Researchers implemented Langer's theory within classroom instruction (i.e., mapping curriculum unit identifying landmarks) in both traditional and non-traditional school settings. The researchers found a statistically significant difference between the treatment and control groups, where students who varied their perspective were able to identify more landmarks and locations and relate landmarks to each other spatially as well. Interestingly, although the sample size was too small for statistical significance, a sub-group of students with a diagnosed attention problem (e.g., ADD, ADHD) demonstrated even larger gains than the study's sample as a whole. Focusing on varying perspective and heightened awareness (mindfulness) increased student learning.

Using a similar approach, Anglin et al. (2008) conducted a quasi-experimental study with sixth-grade middle school students to address gender differences in mathematics performance. Students were assigned to two different groups: one receiving traditional instruction and the other "mindful learning" (p. 134). A key component of how mindful learning was executed was using "conditional learning" (Langer, 1997) in the instruction. Students in the intervention groups received instruction inducing multiple perspectives and exploration (Anglin et al., 2008). Results indicated a statistically significant interaction effect for gender and condition, suggesting mindful learning had a mitigating effect upon gender differences in mathematics performance as female performance improved to the point where both genders performed equally.

These studies elucidate a tenable framework whereby mindfulness can be placed within (or perhaps more appropriately *applied to*) the K–12 educational environment.

Additional support towards a K–12 specific operationalization of mindfulness might be garnered from the multiple instruments developed to measure and assess the construct. As more educators (and specifically school counselors) become interested in mindfulness, efforts to confirm and refine these instruments will increase, assessing the appropriateness, reliability, and validity of the instruments for both adults (Haigh, Moore, Kashdan, & Fresco, 2011) and youth (Brown, West, Loverich, & Biegel, 2011; Greco, Baer, & Smith, 2011; Höfling, Moosbrugger, Schermelleh-Engel, & Heidenreich, 2011) populations.

Implications and Recommendations

Critics may argue that Langer’s theory of mindfulness, with its application to education and instruction, is a continuation of Dewey’s (1938) focus on the educative significance of experience. While Langer’s (1997) central concept of “conditional learning” and focus on varying perspective may seem mildly progressive, no doubt her insistence that learning “the basics so well that they become second nature” is myth (Langer, 2000, p. 221) communicates an almost anti-essentialist air. Engaging in this conversation consents to the argument’s implicit logic that mindfulness is merely recycled theory; as though the construct were a newly packaged and revised version of previous instructional philosophies continually debated. But to step back and consider the construct with its potential for assessing both student *and* counselor/educator mindfulness is to detach from the argument altogether and assume a more macrocosmic perspective. However, such criticisms are arguably warranted considering the construct’s relatively recent entrance into education and the author would be remiss to not offer recommendations for both the further study of mindfulness as well as its application within the K–12 school setting.

Research: K–12 Relevance

First, resonating throughout much of the literature on mindfulness is the call for more rigorous research with many recommendations focusing on experimental designs. While some may argue that the rigor of true experimental design is impossible in the domain of educational research, many researchers assert the contrary (Levin & O’Donnell, 1999; Phillips & Burbules, 2000). For example, Levin and O’Donnell (1999) offered practical direction for increased rigor in educational research. An example of such an approach is evidenced in the quasi-experimental study by Flook et al. (2010) where student participation in mindfulness exercises resulted in significantly higher executive functioning. As is standard with many studies in education, convenience sampling was utilized. However, Flook et al. then employed random selection to assign students to either treatment or control groups. Other similarities to Levin and O’Donnell’s recommendations exist such as consideration and maintenance of the units of analysis and appropriately remaining within the boundaries of the statistical analyses employed. Studies in K–12 education, while potentially challenging for design logistics, can yield rigorous and credible research. Professional school counselors, with background knowledge and experience working with statistics/data, can serve as incredibly valuable research allies (if not lead researchers themselves) for counselor

educators interested in such investigations. The furtherance of mindfulness in K–12 education depends upon such research.

Furthermore, research on mindfulness in K–12 education must also include a link to academic outcomes. Though educators, policymakers, and the public may continue to debate the legislative focus on academic outcomes (e.g., No Child Left Behind [2008], Race to the Top as part of the American Reinvestment and Recovery Act [2009]) connecting mindfulness with student academics further illuminates the construct's impact on student learning. Additionally, such connections demonstrate the relevance of mindfulness to the current educational landscape. Further, the preponderance of psychological research examining therapeutic applications of mindfulness (e.g., mindfulness via school-based meditation for adolescents in Wisner, Jones, & Gwin, 2010) may detract educators from implementing or even exploring the construct. Articles bridging the current chasm between mindfulness and student academics add momentum to the pertinence of mindfulness exercises in instruction (e.g., connecting social/emotional competence via mindfulness with student and classroom outcomes in Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Once again, this focus is well within the domain of professional school counselors already well-versed in the need for connecting student learning outcomes to multi-tiered interventions framed within a comprehensive school counseling program (ASCA, 2012, 2014; Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007; Erford, 2015; Kaffenberger & Young, 2013).

Finally, further research may explore the classroom as a mindful community and the resulting mindful climate. Undoubtedly there is value in studies intentionally constrained to the linear relationship of mindful students and academic outcomes or mindful teachers and academic outcomes. However, studies that address the symbiotic relationship of a mindful community, where teacher/school counselor mindfulness dynamically interacts with and supports student mindfulness, reflect a more accurate depiction of the optimal learning environment systemically situated with the school ecosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Examples, such as Jennings, Foltz, et al. (2011), point to this reciprocation where mindful teachers experienced statistically significant improvements in attitude as well as improvements in classroom climate. Specifically, mindful teachers' classrooms were significantly more productive and handled transitions better. Future research pursuing this end will assist in accentuating the interactive, systemic nature of schools and the effective impact of mindfulness (see Jennings, 2011; Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011). Such a perspective is easily employed for professional school counselors already familiar with an ecological model of both the school and their comprehensive school counseling program (McMahon, Mason, Daluga-Guenther, & Ruiz, 2014). Whether macro-level endeavors (e.g., facilitating school-wide collaborative research with local universities) or focused, micro-level interventions (e.g., addressing specific academic, behavioral, and/or college/career domain needs for a student), school counselors can guide K–12 efforts to properly recognize contextual environmental influences.

Application: School Counselors

As already referenced, there has been limited exploration of school counselor-led mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) within the K–12 school setting. While mindfulness-guided meditations and/or yoga may be outside the parameters for some

school counselors, more common MBIs, such as focused breathing and present-moment awareness, may work well within a comprehensive school counseling program (CSCP) framework. Specifically, school counselors may implement MBIs within both responsive and preventative services of their site CSCP.

Responsive services. In responding to students' experiences of developmental stressors, school counselors may employ breathing and concentration exercises as they work with students towards espousing a present-moment perspective (Tadlock-Marlo, 2011). Use of sensory-awareness techniques (e.g., body scan) not only foster such perspective but aid in helping students achieve calm in the midst of crisis. Similarly, pursuing embodiment with students, viewing the stressor as "other," distinct from self (McCown, Reibel, & Micozzi, 2011), provides immediate aid for the crisis at hand while laying foundational awareness to aid with future crises.

Prevention. Many mindfulness-based programs, primarily designed for adult client populations, may require substantial time commitments from clients/students. However, mirroring emerging research on brief mindfulness interventions (Banks, Welhaf, & Srour, 2015), many school-focused mindfulness curriculums are conducive to the potentially limited timeframe of the K–12 educational environment. Examples of curriculums include: "Learning to BREATHE" (Broderick & Metz, 2009), ".b Curriculum" (Burnett, Cullen, & O'Neill, 2011), "Inner Kids" (Flook et al., 2010), "Mindfulness in Schools Project" (Huppert & Johnson, 2010), and "MindUP" (Schonert-Reichl & Hymel, 2007; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010). Such curricula function to engage K–12 students with MBIs as well as teach mindful awareness practices (MAPs). Drawing on their child development expertise, school counselors can present these MAPs within developmentally appropriate exercises and activities (Flook et al., 2010). Such framing may use common "traditional methods" as well as other creative modalities (e.g., music, movement, games).

Conclusion

Trends, fads, and highly promoted "advances" will continue to assault school counselors and other educators as they strive to improve their practice. Yet before the effectiveness of any such potential innovations can be considered, efforts must be taken to ensure that the operators of those tools are aware and purposeful about their actions. Mindfulness provides a means of operationalizing this intentionality in order to more accurately assess interventions and their outcomes for both school counselors (e.g., attendance, behavior, academics) and classroom teachers (e.g., instructional methods, student learning).

The factors assailing American public education are evidenced by the discrepancies in performance between groups no matter where the lines fall (e.g., gender, race, socioeconomic status). Bombarded with improvement efforts that are often both time and money intensive, it can become difficult for educators to assess whether any real change is occurring (Rathunde & Csikszentmihalyi, 2005). Addressing awareness first, mindfulness conversely propels the analysis of effective interventions beyond mere method and/or strategy. This alone serves an incredibly important and arguably overlooked element of improving student learning. However, mindfulness holds even more potential as demonstrated with its impact upon marginalized populations and

serving the diversity of student learning idiosyncrasies (Langer, 2000). Identifying, measuring, and developing mindfulness facilitates the maximum benefits from the various intervention methods implemented, assisting school counselors and other educators as they make an effective difference in the lives of students.

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