

Bringing Mindfulness into the Schools: A Psychological perspective on improving students' attention

Vandana Singh

Educationist, Social worker, School leadership

DOI: 10.29322/IJSRP.9.08.2019.p9295

<http://dx.doi.org/10.29322/IJSRP.9.08.2019.p9295>

Abstract- Considering the complexity of the various facets of school education and multilayered challenges that obstacle achieving the goals of quality learning, this article attempts to analyze the role and importance of introducing mindfulness in the school educational scheme. The article discusses the findings obtained from an eight-week mindfulness-based intervention with middle school children to assess the effects of mindfulness practices on students' attention. The study examined how mindfulness practices help in improving attention of children. Middle school students (n=40) completed the Mindful Awareness Scale for children (MAAS-C). Pre and post-test (MAAS-C) was administered on the single group.

Index Terms- Mindfulness, Middle school, Attention

I. INTRODUCTION

In the life-cycle of humans, middle childhood and early adolescence is a period of rapid change in physiology and in development of the brain. Beginning of this phase is also marked by the emotional upheavals and behavioural issues of the children. Especially at this technology dominated world, changes in the societal structures and its challenges that is overfilled with constant stimulation it is no surprise that children find it difficult to focus on what they are working on. Children at this stage are constantly under distractions of screens, conversation, movement and thoughts of what is next.



Researches in this area suggest that understanding the role of attention regulation may help in getting insight to understand the developmental aspects and psychological problems in school-age children. Mindfulness-based interventions stimulate positive change in attention regulation as shown and described through researches. Theoretically, the very construct of mindfulness and attention regulation are inherently related.

Traditionally, school education focus is centred on imparting information and knowledge and not giving enough attention to the socio-emotional developmental aspects of children which plays a crucial role in children's learning. However, gradually schools are now realising the importance of addressing the issues pertaining to the mental health and its correlation in children's academic success.

Deconstructing the idea of Mindfulness

The idea of mindfulness is the quality of human consciousness which could be defined as a state of being aware and living in the present moment. Mindfulness is experiencing the present moment without getting trapped into past or future. Mindfulness is about enriching one's experiences at present moment with openness and in non-judgemental way.

Mindfulness is the attribute of consciousness that can be defined as the ability of paying intellectual attention to present moment experience with a open, curious and non-judgmental attitude (Brown and Ryan 2003; Bishop et al. 2004). Mindfulness is the practices that can help students of all ages tune their instruments of learning. Strengthens mental muscle for bringing focus back where we want, when we want. The practice of mindfulness teaches how to pay attention, and this way of paying attention enhances both academic and social-emotional learning.

Mindfulness: The Quality of human consciousness

Mindfulness has been defined in more than one way within the literature; however all definitions share common element that mindfulness is the way of directing attention. Mindfulness is considered to be a state of consciousness that incorporates self-awareness and attention with a core characteristic of being open, receptive and non-judgemental (Brown and Ryan 2003; Kabat-Zinn 1990; Segal et al. 2003). Within the literature concerning mindfulness-based intervention for therapeutic settings mindfulness has been defined as "the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and

non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experiences moment by moment” Kabat-Zinn 2003, p. 145). Being mindful requires awareness and focus on current experience, versus “automatic pilot”, which involves engaging in the behaviour that is out of awareness and attention, that is compulsive or automatic (Kabat-Zinn 1990; Segal et al. 2003)

How mindfulness can be helpful to the children

Childhood is a developmental period marked as a time when children develop a sense of competence and personal self-esteem. During middle childhood cognitive thinking and conceptual skills are refined and consolidated. This period entails advances in understanding, meta-cognition and self-regulation. Mindfulness encompasses an active process to attend to the present moment, which requires the ability to control attention and exercise cognitive functions.

According to developmental theory and research, middle childhood is a time where the processes necessary for the active components of mindfulness (i.e., meta-cognition) are developed.

Mindfulness practices enhance the core ability to human learning is to pay attention and focused concentration on the process and object of learning. Likewise the ability for students to find meaningful understanding in their work is likely related to focusing and paying attention to the tasks they are to perform. A level of attention is obligatory for students to reach a mastery of scholastic concepts.

Black and Fernado (2014) discussed the importance of a learning environment that is free from disruption to support focused academic learning. Various Studies on mindfulness training have shown results in terms of increase in the self-regulation, increased span of attention and reduced psychological stress.

Mindfulness based Programme intervention with Middle school children

In the recent years there has been an increase in the studies related to mindfulness exercises and their ability to help children to concentrate. Much of the research in educational settings tested whether a mindfulness curriculum was able to improve students’ achievement and success. The eight-week long mindfulness programme was structured incorporating various mindfulness exercises and activities. The objective of the study was to assess the effect of mindfulness practices on students’ attention at the middle school level. The intervention was conducted on 40 children from middle school level at The Aarambh School, a CBSE affiliated school based at Raipur, Chhattisgarh. The study was conducted with both, boys and girls,

age group 11 to 14 years. The programme was scheduled during the school morning assembly. A pre-test MAAS-C (Mindful Attention Awareness Scale for Children, Developed by Brown and Ryan, 2003, adapted by Benn, 2004) was conducted on the test group to record the initial level of awareness of attention with the purpose of comparing the data with that of the post-test. The programme included simple mindful breathing exercises, mindful body movements, mindful eating, mindful listening, body scan, awareness of thoughts and associated feelings, mindfulness meditation Children were asked to write their experiences and reflection post-exercises in their mindfulness journal. Beginning of the session, each day, was dedicated for reflection and sharing by the students. After eight-week programme completion post-test MASS-C was conducted to assess the development of attention as a result of mindfulness exercises. Non-structured interview was conducted with middle school teachers to seek their regular classroom observation in terms of children’s engagement and behavioral aspect.

Mindfulness based programme components

Mindful breathing- breathing with awareness

Mindful body movement: awareness of body

Mindful eating: conscious eating the food with the sense of gratitude

Awareness of body, thought and emotions: developing awareness of the interconnection between thought and emotions

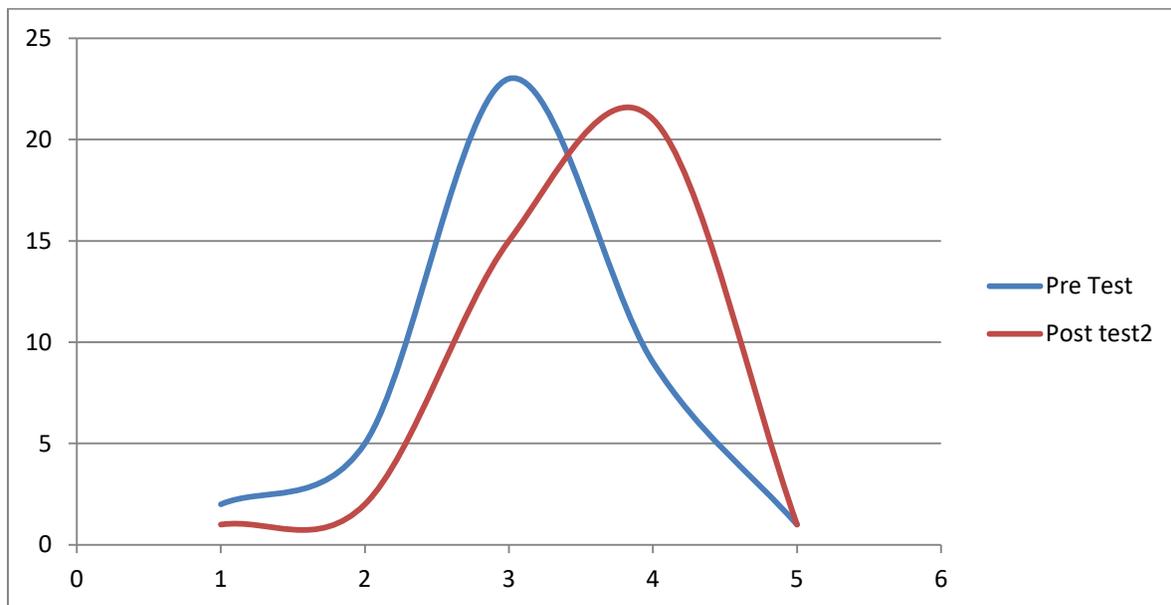
Mindful listening: active listening

Body scan: focusing attention at each of the body parts, awareness of bodily sensation

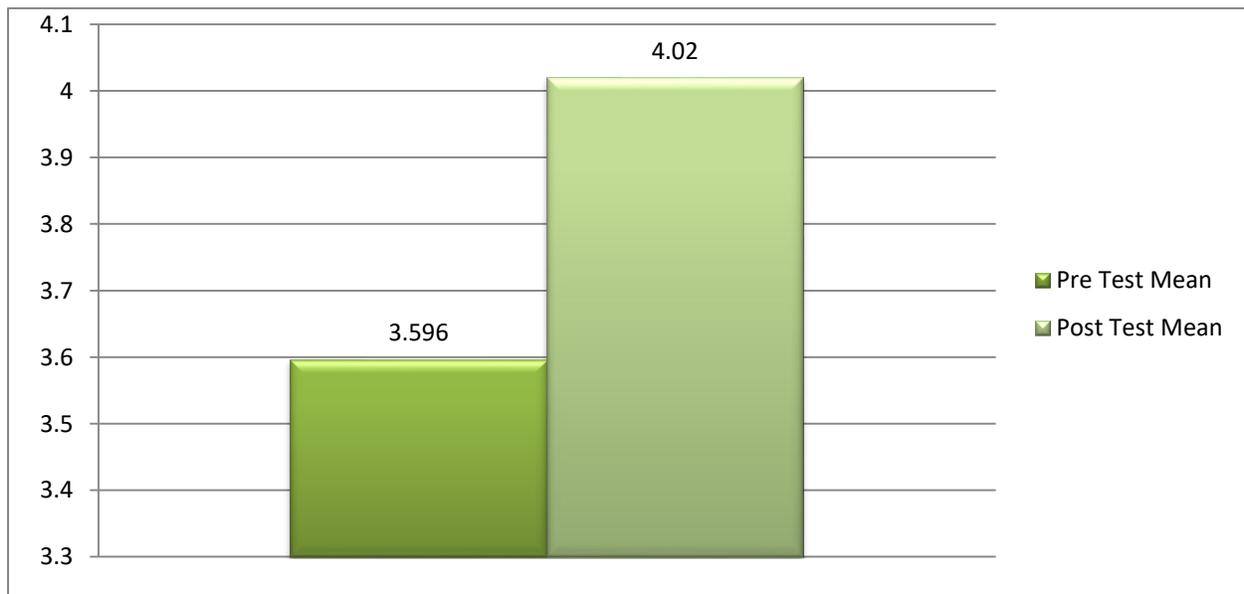
Practicing Gratitude and empathy

Guided meditation- visualization and regulating one’s focus of attention





Pre and Post-MAAS-C test mean score of Children



Comparative data- Pre- and Post MAAS-C test mean scores

The effect of Mindfulness based programme on Students' Attention

Comparing the two data obtained from pre-and post-intervention test shows improvement in the attention span of students. Teachers' classroom observation, during the intervention phase corroborates with the idea that students were able to focus their attention in the classroom learning and improvement in scholastic achievement was recorded. Analysis of the data obtained, from pre-intervention and post-intervention test score of MAAS-C questionnaire shows increase in the students' mindfulness attention awareness from a pre-group mean (x) of 3.596 to a post-group mean of 4.02 on the mindfulness scale of 6. There is 11.67 percent growth recorded statistically in terms of mean square obtained from pre-test and post test intervention. Based on the observation during the sessions and mindfulness journals shared by the students shows improvement in their attention span. Students shared their

experiences during interviews that they feel more relaxed, calm and peaceful after mindfulness sessions.

The statistical results align with that of the informal feedback provided by students in the concluding session indicated that: the majority of students who attended the mindfulness sessions on regular basis found it helpful; it had modest but significant effects on students' attention span, dealing with minor stress and emotional turbulences.

Some of the experiences shared by students' in their mindfulness journal are quoted in their words; *"I feel peace and fresh. It's not difficult for me. I feel very relax after completing mindfulness session"*

"I feel very good when I put my full attention. Sometimes it is very hard to focus on my breath. After completing the session I feel very fresh. The session helps me a lot to focus in the class"

"Today we had a very good morning with mindfulness exercises. We did some exciting activitieswe enjoyed this session a lot"

“I enjoy mindfulness sessions a lot. This brings peace, relax and freshness. I can focus better in my studies”

Results of Mindfulness based intervention with middle school children shows improvement in students’ attention and therefore improvement in students’ academic success. Taking into consideration the importance of addressing psycho-emotional issues of children can help them to do well in academics. Practicing mindfulness can support them in getting aware of their difficulties, challenges, accepting them and seeking support to overcome. Mindfulness could be a way of treating children and adolescents with conditions ranging from attention deficiency, anxiety, anger-management, depression and stress. The benefits of mindfulness are encouraging and proven empirically. The educational journey of a child is the journey of self-exploration, from being to becoming and mindfulness practices could be instrumental in bringing about the harmony between internal and external world, clarity of thought, developed emotional literacy and attunement of cognitive system. More than improved cognitive functions, mindfulness helps in perceiving the self beyond the epidermal boundaries of as an individual. The future of humanity now needs more of compassionate and empathetic hearts than of intellectual minds! Mindfulness practices could be one way that can help children to develop as rational, critical thinkers and evolve as independent thinkers.



REFERENCES

- [1] A. Greco (Eds.), Acceptance and mindfulness interventions for children adolescents and families (pp. 139–161). Oakland, CA Context Press/New Harbinger.
- [2] Greenland, S.K. (2010). The mindful child New York, NY: Atria Paperback Journal of Applied School Psychology, 21, 99–125.
- [3] Kabat-Zinn, J. (2003). Mindfulness-based interventions in context: past, present, and future. Clinical Psychology: Science and Practice, 10, 144–156.
- [4] Katherine Weare, Thich Nhat Hanh, “ Happy teachers change the world”
- [5] Napoli, M., Krech, P. R., & Holley, L. C. (2005). Mindfulness training for elementary school students: The attention academy.
- [6] Kabat-Zinn, J. (1994) Wherever You Go, There You Are: Mindfulness meditation in everyday life. New York:
- [7] Roe-Sepowitz, D. E., & Thyer, B. A. (2004). Adolescent mental health. In L. A. Rapp-Paglicci, C. N. Dulmus, & J. S. Wodarski
- [8] Susan Kaiser Greenland, Mindful games Thich Nhat, Hanh, Planting seeds
- [9] Nhat Hanh, T. (2011). Planting seeds: Practicing mindfulness with children. Berkeley, CA: Parallax.

AUTHORS

First Author – Vandana Singh, Educationist, Social worker, School leadership