

Mindfulness As a Teaching Disposition Begins with Educator Preparation Programs

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Abstract The purpose of this paper is to describe the significance of mindfulness as a teaching disposition that should be incorporated into educator preparation program curriculum. In addition, this paper includes guidelines to engage faculty in this process. Mindfulness in teaching creates a state of mind that encourages creativity, flexible use of information, improvement in student/teacher collaborations and identification of effective instructional strategies. Mindfulness as a teaching disposition has the potential to increase teacher retention, decrease student stress and promote an enriched classroom environment.

Keywords: *mindfulness, educator preparation programs, teacher retention*

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the value of mindfulness as a teaching disposition and how mindfulness as a teaching disposition can only be incorporated into educator preparation programs when faculty understand the value of mindfulness and how to incorporate mindfulness into current teacher education program curriculum.

Teacher excellence and retention is of utmost importance to our national agenda to increase student academic performance and emotional well-being (Wilson, et al., 2008). A great deal of research has been completed in regards to teacher dissatisfaction with their job which leads to teacher burnout and eventually, teacher’s leaving the profession in a faster rate than ever [6]. It is not only teachers who feel this stress in school settings, but students do as well. According to O’Connell, Boat, & Warner (2009), many students hold negative perceptions of their schools, due to stress, bullying and other behavioral factors. To change the negative perception of school, classrooms need to encourage cooperation and engagement to establish productive learning communities for both teachers and students and decrease both teacher and student stress [5].

Teacher development is the important factor to improve the school environment and support the academic and emotional development of students [5]. Educator Preparation Programs need to include practices to develop teacher dispositions to decrease teacher stress, promote positive work-related emotions and increase teaching performance. Educational philosophers, policy makers and practitioners have decried the mindless of schools [9]. According to

Silberman (1970) mindlessness is what is most wrong with schools and colleges. Mindlessness is when is when your mind tends to wander, mistakes are made and forgetfulness increases (Sherretz, 2011). In education teachers who employ the same teaching techniques, assessments, materials and treat students the same each year; are on automatic pilot or they are mindless (Sherretz, 2011). Mindfulness as a teaching disposition is the opposite of mindlessness (Sherretz, 2011). Mindfulness as a thinking disposition is a process orientation that includes multiple perspectives or choices when making classroom decisions [8].

2. Mindfulness as a Teaching Disposition Defined

Mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to unfolding experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2013, p. 144). A mindful individual responds effectively to the environment based on information presented rather than on preconceived notions about events. Langer [8] views mindfulness as a process where an individual seeks multiple points of view about a problem.

Mindfulness in teaching creates a state of mind that encourages creativity, flexible use of information, and improvement in student/teacher collaborations, problem-solving and improved identification of effective student instructional strategies.

Mindful teachers emphasize process and multiple perspectives over a generalized response to classroom situations (Langer, 1997). Students that are mindful understand there is not one correct response to a question

and they explore alternative responses; student productivity and creativity has been increased (Langer 1997).

3. Mindfulness Research for Educators

Recent research has examined the value of teacher mindfulness in the classroom to increase teacher and student sense of well-being and teaching and learning efficacy (Meiklejohn, et al., 2012). Data supports that mindfulness improves well-being by reducing stress and fosters social connections (Ludwig and Kabat-Zinn, 2008 and Ruff and Mackenzie, 2009). Current evidence for mindfulness interventions for K – 12 students report improvements in working memory, attention, academic skills and social-emotional regulation (Meiklejohn, 2012). Neuroscience, medical and psychological research provides evidence that teachers benefit professionally and personally from mindfulness practices (Meiklejohn, et al., 2012). Kindergarten through 12th grade teachers face high levels of stress and burnout (Tsouloupas et al, 2010). According to Greeson (2009) 52 studies indicate mindfulness training is associated with reduced emotional distress and more positive states of mind.

4. Mindfulness and Educator Preparation Programs

Mindfulness may be discussed as a theory emanating from constructivism theory and as a disposition that can be internalized through specific training which has been supported by research (For example, Greeson, 2009). Mindfulness should be introduced to teacher candidates during educator preparation programs and to the faculty in higher education who create the learning opportunities for teacher candidates (Sherretz, 2011). Mindfulness as a teaching disposition can only be incorporated into educator preparation programs when higher education faculty understand the value of mindfulness and understand how to incorporate mindfulness into existing educator preparation program curriculum.

Based up the review of research on the idea of mindfulness as a means to promote a positive learning environment for school children and their teachers, we have compiled a list of ten practical tips for teacher educators seeking to include such a disposition in their educator preparation program.

5. Guidelines to Promote Mindfulness as Disposition in Educator Preparation Programs

Practical guidelines for teaching mindfulness as disposition to teacher educators;

(1) *Provide a clear explanation of mindfulness and its role in creating a positive learning environment.*

Mindfulness can assist teachers in the challenges of a classroom. In order to productively deal with classroom management, teaching and learning and the emotional

challenges of a school environment, teachers require competence in social and emotional matters [2]. While the nation focuses on teacher quality, the matter of mindfulness is not acknowledged [6]. As teacher educators, we must include the social and emotional skills of future teachers. It is our job to prepare them for their own classrooms which holistically speaking encompasses content knowledge and emotional and social intelligences.

(2) *Assure teacher educators that mindfulness is not an element of intelligence, but rather patience and exploration.*

The research that is available on mindfulness in education has provided potential for improving education. Mindfulness is more than a set of instructional practices to improve what students know and can do. As such, mindfulness is not solely focused on raising student test scores, but promoting an ability to think critically and creatively. Teacher educators need to know that no one can learn to be mindful in a short-term setting. Mindfulness must be fully understood before it can be meaningful. One must be open to new ideas and perspectives [9]. Mindfulness must be cultivated by an openness of new ideas and sensitivity. When one is open to new ideas, he/she is more willing to explore and take in new inclinations. Mindfulness is not about memorizing new facts or dates, but rather taking in of new ideas to stimulate one's attention to responding to what goes on in the classroom instead of reacting to it. Learning a new way of thinking and being takes time and patience and a realization that everyone reaches a new way of thinking at different rates. It is important to understand though, that everyone can reach a new realization and perspective just at different points of time. Because teacher educators, like their students, come to mindfulness with varying backgrounds and experiences, it stands to reason that imposing a time component on the exploration is not useful or warranted.

(3) *Compile recent research in the area of mindfulness in education and have several small group discussions.*

If teacher quality is a concern for our nation, then the educational agenda should include social and emotional competence [5]. Recent research is available regarding mindfulness in the classroom as well as training for teachers. Peer-reviewed research articles abound regarding the definition of, practice of, and prospective usefulness of mindfulness-based practice. However, little to no research exists on how to prepare teacher educators in the role of mindfulness. As such, teacher educators should take the time to research what is available in the area of mindfulness and spend time in meaningful discourse with other teacher educators. In addition, purposeful research opportunities can be initiated in this area of teaching and learning.

(4) *Willing engagement in the process.*

In the world of university professors, the idea of academic freedom is alive and well. Therefore, it is not possible to cajole education professors into doing anything they do not wish to do. Teacher educators need to banish the false assumption that all teacher candidates as well as in-service teachers possess mindfulness as a disposition already [6]. Hopefully, the natural desire to learn and explore new ideas and possibilities will grab the attention of such professionals.

(5) *Demonstrate HOW mindfulness can function as a disposition.*

Experimental research has provided a framework for the theory and explanation of mindfulness [8]. These investigations discuss the circumstances under which mindfulness is most likely to thrive. The idea of a disposition addresses the break between a teacher's abilities and his/her decisions. According to John Dewey (1933), the "knowledge of methods alone will not suffice: there must be the desire, the will, to employ them. This desire is an affair of personal disposition" (p. 30).

(6) *Administrative support.*

The good news is that support for teaching and encouraging mindfulness as a disposition in a teacher educator programs does not need to mean financial support. In this case, support is the careful leadership of the educator preparation programs leader or leaders. The idea of including mindfulness as a disposition for teacher preparation must be sustained by those who teach, mentor, and supervise teacher educators. Without administrative support, the idea stays in the planning stages instead of the application stage. Administrative support also considers the application of mindfulness in the school and committee meetings. It is not just talk, but real action with the entire group of teacher educators. When mindfulness is practiced as a part of one's professionalism, it can create relational comfort among those professionals [4]. Active support from the administrative team can positively influence faculty members and other teacher educators.

(7) *Develop a plan for incorporating mindfulness as a disposition in the curriculum.*

To be honest, mindfulness cannot and will not become a personal disposition for teacher educators or teacher candidates overnight or in one professional development session. As such, it is best to create a plan for incorporating mindful practices into teacher educator courses. The first step in the plan must be purposeful professional development seminars that are offered often enough at varying times to meet the scheduling needs of the teacher educators. Proper coaching and other avenues of support should be created to recognize the effect on teaching and learning in the new culture of mindfulness [6]. The plan must be multi-level in its approach of preparing those involved in how to explain mindfulness and then practice in a realistic setting.

(8) *Active incorporation of mindfulness in the teacher educator preparation program (i.e. meetings, classes).*

Once an EPP has decided to include mindfulness into the curriculum, engaged in the necessary research, and have administrative support in its importance, then mindfulness needs to be an element of the program, all aspects of the program. Mindfulness should be incorporated into faculty meetings, committee meetings and other gatherings where teacher educators meet and plan. Active practice and participation sends the message that mindfulness as a disposition is important enough to be a component of the EPP and its mission in preparing caring, knowledgeable, and effective educators.

(9) *Utilize Mindfulness Mentors for teacher educator faculty.*

Most EPPs require that teacher candidates actively participate in practice teaching or student teaching prior to

graduation. During this time period, the teacher candidates are provided with teacher mentors who work with the teacher candidates to guide them in the ways of the classroom. A mentor is someone who engages in interpersonal associations that include a series of meaningful, purposeful social interactions [1]. The mentor and mentee relationship is based on the idea that the interaction is beneficial to both parties. As they both navigate the environment, a continuous dialogue is necessary to make progress and purposeful experiences. Just as no teacher educator would want to have a practicing teacher left to his/her own devices in a classroom, those new to the mindfulness approach should not be left on their own either. Serving as a mentor can provide benefits to teacher educators such as renewed passion for the job, the chance to make a difference in another's professional and/or personal life, improved collegiality and a self-improved professional ethic [7,10]. Mentors provide an opportunity for experiencing new construction of knowledge and ideas, while also reconstructing knowledge and ideas to pass on to others.

(10) *Create an atmosphere of continuous improvement and learning*

Once teacher candidates become in-service teachers, they are expected to participate in professional development throughout their careers. Much research abounds on the importance of active engagement in learning is necessary for continuous cognitive growth. The same concept should be applied to teacher educators. The idea of embracing mindfulness as a teaching disposition will be new to many educators. As such, embracing new concepts and skills is what is or should be taught in the teacher preparation programs. Teacher educators participate in research projects and presentations at conference as a means of learning and improving. The concept of mindfulness should be incorporated in the same manner. Building a community of mindful educators begins with an EPP and its teacher educators.

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