

INCORPORATING MINDFULNESS AS A COMPONENT OF SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING (SEL)

AFT/ATF Teacher Leader Program

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Research Question:

How does routinely incorporating mindfulness in the classroom affect student social-emotional learning (SEL)?

Rationale:

Our school district has experienced an increasing number of student related tragedies. Students, teachers, educators, parents, and community members have come together to demand action by the district and the state to address student health and well-being. One such recommendation is for Albuquerque Public Schools (APS) to develop and adopt a social-emotional learning curriculum and standards. Studies have shown that the implementation of mindfulness practices in classrooms have resulted in improved student self-control, overall well-being, stress reduction, and substance use. Mindfulness based practices could potentially be an effective component of the APS SEL curriculum.¹

Review of Literature:

In a 2018 collaborative study between Transforming Education, Harvard University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and the Boston Charter Research Collaborative, researchers found that students who participated in an eight-week mindfulness training program had reduced perceptions of stress and had an increase in self-control related to sustained attention. Students were guided in a variety of mindfulness-based activities by Calmer Choice instructors (a non-profit promoting mindfulness in schools) focusing on attention building and awareness. Before and after the eight-week program, students were administered an attention awareness survey. Previous results have found a correlation between higher levels of student mindfulness and improved academic and behavioral performance. While the results did show improvements in student stress and attention levels through researcher observation, student responses to the survey did not reflect the development of higher levels of mindfulness. The report recommends further long-term study of mindfulness programs and their potential for deeper social-emotional changes within students.²

Study Design:

I gave students a survey based on a mindfulness scale developed at La Salle University and Drexel University. The survey consists of twenty-three questions related to one's awareness of corporal sensations throughout the day, how one deals with difficult emotions, levels of awareness when

¹Randy J. Semple, Vita Droutman, Brittany Ann Reid, "Mindfulness Goes to School: Things Learned (So Far) from Research and Real-World Experiences," *Psychology in the Schools* 54, no. 1, (January 2017): 29-52, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5405439/>.

²Akira S. Gutierrez, Sara B. Krachman, Ethan Scherer, Martin R. West, John D. E. Gabrieli, "Mindfulness in the Classroom: Learning from a School-based Mindfulness Intervention through the Boston Charter Research Collaborative," Transforming Education and the Center for Education Policy Research Harvard University, January 2019. <https://www.transformingeducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/2019-BCRC-Mindfulness-Brief.pdf>.

interacting with others, as well as basic demographic information. Adapting the survey for a high school classroom, questions related to marital and parental status were removed. After the preliminary survey, each class was given a brief overview of mindfulness and were informed that each class period for the next eight weeks would begin with a voluntary mindfulness exercise. Students who felt uncomfortable with participating could sit out the exercise. The exercise consisted of an eight-minute guided mindfulness practice focusing on the breath and awareness of thoughts. The same exercise was administered for the following five weeks before schools were abruptly closed due to the recent COVID-19 outbreak.

Data Analysis Summary:

The preliminary results from the first survey indicate that of the two main categories of questions related to awareness, students have the most difficulty with awareness related to emotions compared to an awareness of their physical presence. The majority of students struggle with how to react to and identify emotions (71%), wish they could control their emotions (63%), and actively engage in other activities to distract themselves from certain thoughts or feelings (55%). Students responded with higher levels of awareness to questions that focused on physical awareness, such as being aware of the feel and smell of the air outside (58%), being conscious of the feel of water while bathing (60%), and the awareness of people's facial and body expressions (71%). Final results of the study are inconclusive due to a low number of student responses during distance learning.

Findings:

Despite the lack of quantitative results due to the study's disruption, there is evidence that some students did experience beneficial effects of regular mindfulness practice. Two weeks after distance learning was implemented, a few students reached out to me asking where they could find resources related to mindfulness practices. While general anxiety was the most common difficulty these students were struggling with, others were trying to cope with breakups, family conflicts, and the loss of their senior year without their typical support systems. These students later reported that even though these challenges did not go away, practicing mindfulness helped them with such things as getting out of bed, mustering enough energy to complete school assignments, handling difficult emotions, and helping to fall asleep. Although the findings of this study were inconclusive in indicating the efficacy of regularly implemented mindfulness practices with my classroom, more complete studies do indicate students can benefit from receiving regular instruction in mindfulness.³

Recommendations:

Mindfulness based practices should be part of Albuquerque Public School's comprehensive SEL curriculum. Educators should be provided with a variety of easily accessible mindfulness resources so they may be able to choose activities and practices best suited to the needs of their individual classes. Given the adversities many of our students face, implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom can assist with deepening their emotional awareness and improving overall well-being, thereby contributing to a more positive learning environment.

³ "Mindfulness in Education: Research Highlights," Greater Good Science Center University of California, Berkeley. https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/images/uploads/Mindfulness_in_Education_Research_Highlights.pdf.

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