

Contemplative Pedagogy: Mindfulness Methodology in Education & Human Development

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Abstract

Today's children and adolescents live in a digital era, exposed to technology at a young age and often times maintain fast-paced lifestyles. Expectations for students in education have increased steadily in recent decades. In accordance with student lifestyles and heightened expectations in academia, education for children in P-12 has become consistently saturated with technological-based enhancements. As a result, educators continuously search for innovative pedagogical approaches, such as contemplative pedagogy that reaches their students academically. Furthermore, modern pedagogical approaches frequently encompass a social and emotional component; consequently influencing the naturalistic development of the student. The aim of this research is to explore contemplative pedagogy with a special emphasis upon mindfulness methodology in the field of education as it affects the naturalistic development of children and adolescents in P-12. The author first begins by exploring contemplative pedagogy in education, followed with the influences of mindfulness-based practices, including contemplative pedagogical practices for the current educator. Finally, the author highlights related implications and offers suggestions for further research.

Keywords: Education, Mindfulness, Contemplative Science, Contemplative Pedagogy, Naturalistic Development

1. Introduction

In a fast paced lifestyle when distractions remain a noteworthy constant, an innovative approach to education becomes a necessary tool as an educator. With academic standards and performance expectations in the classroom at a steady increase (Texas Education Agency, 2017), pedagogical tools to enhance student achievement are highly sought as a result. The goal of professional educators is to reach students in a way for the student to internalize the material taught, grasp the material for future application, and scaffold upon preceding material as they advance within their educational career. Contemplative pedagogy, although relatively modern in comparison to other well-practiced forms of pedagogy, is greatly described in current literature as a tool for educators to reach their students using innovative methodology encompassing the mind, body, and, spirit all while maintaining within the education parameters. Substantiated in current literature, numerous examples of contemplative pedagogy techniques harness the essence of the approach, including but certainly not limited: (a) mindfulness- awareness, (b) deep listening, (c) meditation, (d) open communication, (e) honesty or intellectual humility, and (f) yoga (Barbezat & Bush, 2014; Beer, 2010; Cooke, 2015). An approach clearly based upon self-awareness and personal reflection. Pedagogical styles are as unique as the instructor itself, however to implement contemplative pedagogy is challenging in two areas, educational value and application of practice and practicality (Coburn, Grace, Klein, Komjathy, Roth, & Simmer-Brown, 2011) .

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In addition to self-understanding and exploration, human development literature offers a wealth of knowledge upon wellness models incorporating mindfulness and meditation in daily lifestyles including the integration of yoga meditation techniques rooted in metacognition and decision making skills (Schuttloffel, 2013). Although mindfulness and meditative daily lifestyle techniques are greatly described in current literature, there is a dearth of literature describing applicable pedagogical techniques in relation to using mindfulness and meditation in the classroom. The aim of the current research is to explore empirically based contemplative pedagogical practices in education. The author contextually reviewed contemplative pedagogy as a current educational practice while placing an emphasis upon mindfulness methodology including meditative techniques. As a final objective, the author highlights implications related to contemplative pedagogical practices in the field of education and offers suggestions for further research.

2. Contemplative Pedagogy in Education & Human Development

Let us begin by putting contemplative practices into a working frame of educational context. Collectively, contemplative practices begin with an intrinsic awareness developed by using first-person reflections. Historically formed to include the whole person in a real world setting and rooted in spiritual or religious traditions, contemplative practices have infused traditions such as reflective deep thinking including applications as unique as the individual itself. Cultivating contemplative practices in the classroom using a variety of techniques is termed as contemplative pedagogy. The practice of contemplative pedagogy with children and adolescents is a novice approach in the classroom. By incorporating innovative techniques such as mindfulness-awareness, students have the opportunity to explore their state of mind, create a sense of body awareness, and become spiritually centered in a generalized and unique form. Commonly implemented techniques include guided meditation, self-inquiry, silent sitting meditation, mindfulness, and yoga (Grace, 2011, p.99). Derived from humanistic education, contemplative pedagogy allows for constructive thinking and experiential learning; more so based upon traditional intrinsic factors such as mind, body, and spirit.

Coburn, et al. (2011) declare based upon the data discovered within their research, that there is not a specific theory or praxis of contemplative pedagogy. Applying historical perspectives, Bai, Scott, and Donald (2009) describe educators instructing students is not the same as allowing students to become proficient in the acquisition of the knowledge and skills allowing them to become successful in schools. Moreover, Roeser and Eccles (2015) assessed naturalistic development in context with mindfulness and compassion by using training developed specifically designed for children and adolescents. An educators' influence upon the naturalistic development of a child in P-12 grow to be trivial in terms of a positive or negative affects. The professionals ability to cultivate the awareness of students' consciousness and ethical decision making is significant in terms of structuring proficiency in students. Contemplative pedagogy is heavily student based, specific techniques such as intrinsic awareness encompass high-level thinking in the classroom allowing for an energetic dynamic. As a result an educators' proficiency within this approach is essential as active student participation is critical in the success in contemplative pedagogical traditions, according to Roeser and Peck (2009).

3. Contemplative Pedagogy & Mindfulness

What if schools incorporated mindfulness into their curricula? How would this work? Who would this benefit, if anyone? O'Donnell (2015) describes mindfulness as a practice embedded in education where "mindfulness is not a practice that is foreign to education" (p.189). Begging the question could mindfulness be promoted in schools, perhaps the environment or curricula delivered by the school counselor or other qualified school personnel benefiting students, faculty, in addition to the general academic climate. Within context of the present exploratory research, mindfulness is derived from Buddhist origin as seeking the meaning and understanding of life and related issues (Baird, Mrazek, Phillips, & Schooler, 2014). These characteristics are fundamental towards becoming aware of underlying factors attributed to the presenting sense of distress. Mindfulness as a construct in building awareness is applied in a variety of customs with individual practices widely varied. Foundationally, Walker (1987) portrays mindfulness-awareness as using meditation techniques as a method of reflection and awareness (p.98). An educator's professional reflective practice allows the instructor to reflect upon the lesson materials, instructional pedagogy, student understanding and self-perception. Montgomery and Walker (2012) describe ethical behaviors in education to include professional reflection. By encompassing a sense of mindfulness-awareness through incorporating reflective thinking daily, the educator is building a stronger ethical practice thus refining their craft as a professional educator. Moreover, addressing student diversity is critical to establishing a nurturing environment in the classroom.

Socioeconomic status, race, ethnicity, student abilities, social and emotional preparedness are reflective areas synthesized using contemplative practices. Additionally, as a result of incorporating mindfulness using a contemplative pedagogical approach the educator is creating a significant opportunity for cultural awareness and cultural learning in the classroom (Christopher, 2008).

4. Contemplative Pedagogy in Practice

Qualitative and quantitative research in contemplative pedagogy uncovered this approach as an applied science, challenging to quantify due to the individual nature of the approach however measurable in varied areas of attentive focus and observation. Contemplative practices can such as transcendental meditation have empirically proven to be effective in school based settings as a technique able to reach students, focusing upon their well-being, social competence, and academic achievement (Waters, Barsky, Ridd, & Allen, 2015). By reducing psychological stressors (Kemeny, Foltz, Cavanagh, Cullen, Giese-Davis, Jennings, Rosenberg, Gillath, Shaver, Wallace, & Ekman, 2012; Monroe & Jankowski, 2016), contemplative practices promote change in lifestyle and increase the learning dynamic in the classroom. Although personal and challenging to empirically quantify as asserted by Lutz, Jha, Dunne, and Saron (2015), mindfulness techniques and approaches such as meditation are understood as phenomenological changes based upon the experience of the individual and are as unique in variation as the individual itself. O'Donnell (2015), describes the Seaweed Practice as an engaging process for students to engage upon by primarily focusing within bodily awareness by allowing children and adolescents a reflective 'body-scanning' opportunity (p.200). Additionally, aspects of yoga and physically engaging exercise have proven beneficial effects on mood and anxiety (Baird, et al., 2014; Bloch, et al., 2016; Roeser & Eccles, 2015). Yoga is a 5000-year-old tradition practiced differently in different parts of the world. In the United States, the emphasis in yoga is largely on the body and physical postures including a differentiated spiritual tradition (Shorr, 2009). Although contemplative practices often incorporate that of a spiritual or religious aspect, the practice itself is 'not inherently religious' (Shairo, Lyons, Miller, Butler, Vieten & Zelazo, 2015, p.1). Yoga has become more common among societal figures significantly influencing health advocates in P-12.

One of the many examples of contemplative pedagogical techniques in practice is mindfulness meditation. Researchers have hypothesized mindful meditative training increases attentive learning, the ability to improve focus and concentration, and cultivate useful motivation skills that are able to be applied in daily activities and foster classroom preparedness (Baird et al., 2014; Chess, 2013). Various forms and practices of physical, mental and spiritual activity encompass positive attributes in and out of the classroom. Bloch, Farrell, Hook, Van Tongeren, and Penberthy (2016) found that student participation in a meditation program resulted in significant improvements in their sense of awareness and mindfulness in the classroom (p.10). Meditation in the form of reflection, centeredness, and overall wellness methods including art therapy and the practice of yoga have been proven to enhance ethical behaviors and reflective thinking in the classroom (Albrecht, 2014; Shelov, Suchday, & Friedberg, 2009; Cooke, 2015; Frankilin, Farrelly-Hansen, Marek, Swan-Foster, & Wallingford, 2000). For example, Kripalu yoga allows for the focus upon meditation and the interplay of mind, body, and energy (Mendelson, Greenberg, Dariotis, Gould, Rhoades, & Leaf, 2010) promoting self-awareness and self-motivation. Additionally, numerous medical studies among children and adolescents have reflected yoga related activity not only helps improve fitness levels, it also has the ability to decrease anxiety and improve one's emotional wellbeing (Bosch, Traustadottir, Howard, & Matt, 2009). Shelov, et al., (2009), highlighted a 2008 survey conducted by Harris Interactive Service Bureau proved evidence that almost 16 million people in the United States practice yoga and more than 18 million more are interested in meditative practices including children and adolescents. According to Streeter, Whitfield, Owen, Rein, Karri, Yakhkind, Perlmutter, Prescott, Renshaw, Ciraulo, & Jensen (2010) the practice of meditative practices are associated with increased brain gamma-aminobutyric acid (GABA) levels. Yoga techniques are ideal for academic focus. As a useful practice within contemplative pedagogy, the methodology supporting yoga has proven helpful with behavioral intervention using yoga postures (Schuttloffel, 2013; Grace, 2011). As a result applied yoga techniques in the classroom have provided evidence towards a positive correlation between improvements in mood and anxiety scales (Ross & Thomas, 2010; Eppert, Vokey, Nguyen, & Bai, 2015; Christopher, 2008). Yoga interventions appeared to be equal or superior to exercise (Waters, et al., 2015).

According to Simard (2009), studies comparing the effects of yoga and exercise seem to indicate that yoga may be as effective as or better than exercise at improving a variety of health-related outcome measures for children and adolescents. Moreover, the application of this contemplative technique becomes useful as children and adolescents largely benefit from a daily routine of physical activity.

5. Implications & Conclusion

Transforming the culture in education are innovative techniques unique to the educator, influencing the dynamic of the classroom such as contemplative pedagogy. Stemming from contemplative practices, research related to contemplative pedagogy has proven useful in the classroom with training related to techniques and application for educators. A significant result of this approach includes the influence upon the naturalistic development of children and adolescents. Physical activity including meditative practices is considered an acceptable method for improving and maintaining academic success, emotional health, and overall stability in children and adolescents. As described within this research there are several overall academic and health benefits for children and adolescents by implementing contemplative pedagogy in the classroom, however the author found a variation of implications related to the application and approach. Firstly, the variation of individuality related to contemplative techniques. Methodology will differ based upon population and setting. As a result, it is challenging to assess an individual's contemplative practice in terms of mindfulness and meditation techniques, as this is a very personal account of reflection and focus (Eppert, et al., 2015). Secondly, a students' intrinsic motivation is a great implication. Educators are able to reach students using a number of approaches, however intrinsic motivation comes from within the individual. There is a spark that is ignited in efforts to move forward upon the next journey or adventure. There is an existing challenge that is presented when attempting to ignite another's fire or motivation that is unpredictable. The author asserts while there is a wealth of knowledge related to contemplative practices, there remains a dearth of empirical research related to this practice towards pedagogical application. While there is a growing body of evidence supporting the application in P-12 there is little practicality delivered. Further research is needed in this area for practical application across cultures and P-12 settings.

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