

Megan Range

Dr. Raman

CAS 138T

28 March, 2015

### Pay Attention

Psychological health is too often given short shrift, especially in education. The Pennsylvania Department of Education requires schools to have health classes, but there is no mention of the necessity of mental health in the curriculum (Pennsylvania Department of Education). This needs to be remedied. Psychological and physical health have a symbiotic relationship, so when one is ignored, the other is bound to suffer. This ill-founded ignorance of such an important fact is especially debilitating to the population of young students, since their early education sets up the foundation for the rest of their life, and because many psychological disorders show their unwanted faces in childhood. Thus, a clause should be placed into Pennsylvania's *Academic Standards for Health, Safety, and Physical Education* regarding courses on mental health, namely requiring courses on mindfulness meditation in elementary education.

Children need mindfulness to help them confront the monsters under their bed, or rather, the demons of their own mind. Elementary ages are impressionable years, in which children learn the basic moral codes of life. They learn to share, that stealing and hurting others is bad, but what if they learned more than that? What if they learned how to banish troublesome thoughts, and be truly happy with what life gives them? Elementary health requirements address behaviors, such as how to behave to de-escalate a conflict, how to behave to prevent disease, but

how they think about behaviors isn't reflected at all in the curriculum (Standards ). Too many adults feel that life is a burden, the "necessary" productivity of the workplace making it an earthbound hell. "Life may or may not suck any more than it did a generation ago, but our belief in "progress" has increased expectations that life should be more satisfying, resulting in mass disappointment" (Levine). If we want our children to escape this fate, and be able to think themselves out of troubling situations or states of mind, we should place mindfulness meditation into the requirements for Pennsylvania health class curriculum.

Having courses contributing to mental health, such as Mindfulness, is vitally important specifically in lower grades because some of the most common mental illnesses, such as OCD, ADHD, Autism, and Bi-Polar disorder, become apparent during the elementary school years (Kids' Mental Health). One in five American youth are affected by some kind of mental illness (NIMH RSS). And that number's on the rise. "Just [three years ago], the CDC reported a rate of one in 88, which represented a 23 percent increase since 2010, and 78 percent since 2007" (Mercola). Without mental health courses such as mindfulness, this means more IEPs, or Individualized Education Programs, more counseling, and more parent meetings explaining how teachers should deal with their child. It could also mean more money spent by the state when these children, dejected and rejected by society, become prison or mental ward-bound adults. Courses on Mindfulness teach anxiety-ridden children to desist from obsessing over troubling thoughts, autistic and bipolar kids to be less anxious, and students with ADHD and ADD to focus (Pederson) (Garey) (Corliss) (Mindful Schools) (McCullough).

Mindfulness meditation is basically what it sounds like: inward contemplation that makes the student more aware and nonjudgmental of his or her own actions, thoughts, and words, and teaches them to live in the "now". This practice, derived from Zen Buddhism, has been shown to

help the student through strong emotions and difficult times. “If students can learn to be “fully-present,” they can increase the quality of their learning performance by being more focused, and become better able to deal with stressful situations (Langer, 1993)” (Journal of Applied School Psychology).

A typical elementary Mindfulness course starts with the teacher explaining to the class what Mindfulness is, and advising the class to bring their seats up to the front of the room. Then the educator tells the class to “put their mindful ears on” and concentrate really hard on a bell or another instrument about to be played. The kids are encouraged to listen very well and pay very close attention to what is happening, the teacher goes over what was just accomplished ---in this case, mindful listening---, and the lesson ends. Following lessons go over such things as mindful breathing, mindful walking, and a “body scan”, which is a concentration on specific parts of the body, and a consequent releasing of toxic stress pent up in those areas (Mindful Schools).

For Mindfulness to be taught in schools, educators first have to be proficient in it. This is accomplished conveniently by an online course, for which large groups, such as schools, receive a substantial discount. Schools can also apply for scholarships to further reduce the cost of the classes. After teachers have the Mindfulness Fundamentals or one of the other basic courses under their belt, they are qualified to teach mindfulness meditation to their respective classes. Mindful Schools will bequeath the supplies needed unto those willing to learn its wisdom, and thus, a school will benefit from its teachings. The cost of such a program would naturally, if unfortunately, fall to the taxpayers. But with so many public schools in the state, the “Group Discount” should make the program generally inexpensive (Mindful Schools), and with the prolific positive results of such courses, the benefits thoroughly outweigh the costs.

Some people believe that Mindfulness in schools is brainwashing the young people into practicing Buddhism. ““We’re concerned that mindful education is a Buddhist practice masquerading as science at the school,”” (Kavanagh via MacKenzie). This assertion is false. Just because some elements of Buddhist meditation are taught in schools does not mean that the religion itself is being taught. Just because children are taught to treat each other the way they would want to be treated, and to assert that America is “One nation, under God”, does not mean that they are being forced into Christianity under the guise of ethics or patriotism. Parents can even opt their child out of the program if they feel the need (Staff Training Model), so Mindfulness as malicious Buddhist “brainwashing” is out of the question.

Educators reap the benefits of Mindfulness as well as their students, since children are not the only ones who become stressed in the classroom. “I had decided that this would be my last year teaching until the mindfulness program began at my school. Now I am rededicated to my profession” (First Grade teacher via Mindful Schools). This teacher loved the experience of Mindfulness so much, that she volunteered to speak on its behalf at a school press conference. Many other teachers have also had their outlook similarly improved, making the class a better place for themselves and for their students. Mindfulness is a breath of fresh air in what is becoming a stale classroom, as standardized tests squelch educators’ and students’ room for creativity. Mindfulness also helps teachers with difficult children. ““We tell kids be quiet, calm yourself down, be still. We tell them all these things they need in the classroom, but we’re not teaching them how to do that.”” (Larochette via Schwartz) Meditation such as mindfulness teaches children why it is beneficial to be quiet and pay attention to what the educator is saying. And when troublesome children find peace of mind, their classmates and superiors are able to find it, too.

Learning mindfulness also has substantial benefits when taught in underprivileged and high-risk communities:

I was sitting in a party with my friend. Two guys come over to us and they want to fight. My friend has a gun and he's ready to use it. You know what I did? I'm sittin' in the party doin' a body scan. That's right, a body scan. I breathed. Then I took my friend's gun and walked out of the party. (Amar via Mindful Schools)

Mindfulness is the ideal conflict de-escalator. It doesn't require use of words, nor calming tone of voice. It just requires a deep breath, a shift in thinking, a helpful action, and perhaps it could save a life or two. And in such impoverished communities where stress and violence are plentiful, something that allows children to focus on their own minds rather than the chaos of the outside world is a godsend (Schwartz).

Today's education is going through a major shift in ideology. From the Common Core, to the persistent proliferation of standardized testing, teaching is not as it used to be. Kids are both more stressed, and, whether by effect or just coincidence, plagued by an increasing amount of mental disorders. And to top that, after graduation, they have to face a progressively fast-paced and unsympathetic working world. To combat this unrest, and salvage whatever sanity is left in the human race, there is Mindfulness. Mindfulness is a wondrous tool, but presently the only loud voice in the minority of courses seriously focused on mental health. When I was in elementary school, I recall no class time devoted to maintaining mental health. When I was in middle school and high school, the "de-escalating a conflict" and "decision making" portions of the curriculum were minimally helpful, if at all. These teachings do not help when the conflicting party is yourself, or the decisions simply—or rather, not so simply—what to think about. As a student with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder, I would have liked more. I would have liked a program such as Mindfulness required for my school, and not just participated in by a smattering

of other, perhaps wiser and richer school districts throughout the country. So help the struggling child I once was. Help the underprivileged individual. Help the teacher. They need something like Mindfulness to convince them that life is not an earthbound hell, or an agonizing routine of exams. They need you to make it a requirement for Pennsylvania's school curriculum.

Works Cited

"Academic Standards for Health, Safety, and Physical Education." SandyHealth.pdf. Pennsylvania Department of Education, 18 July 2002. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.

"Children's Behavioral and Emotional Disorders." Kid's Mental Health Information Portal. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.

"Children's Mental Health." [Http://www.apa.org](http://www.apa.org). American Psychological Association, n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.

Corliss, Julie. "Mindfulness Meditation May Ease Anxiety, Mental Stress - Harvard Health Blog." Harvard Health Blog RSS. N.p., 08 Jan. 2014. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.

Garey, Julian. "Get Informed." The Power of Mindfulness. Child Mind Institute, n.d. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.

"Health & Physical Education." Health & Physical Education. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.

Levine, Bruce, Ph.D. "Why the Rise of Mental Illness? Pathologizing Normal, Adverse Drug Effects, and a Peculiar Rebellion - Mad In America." Mad In America. N.p., 31 July 2013. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.

MacKenzie, Ian. "Yes, Meditation Should Be Taught in Public School." IanMack. N.p., 23 Nov. 2008. Web. 25 Apr. 2015

McCullough, Lynda. "Mindfulness Skills Useful in Addressing ADHD." Psych Central. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.

Mercola, Dr. "The Increasing Rate of Mental Health Disorder in Children." Mercola.com. N.p., 20 June 2013. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.

"National Survey Confirms That Youth Are Disproportionately Affected by Mental Disorders." NIMH RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.

Pederson, Traci. "Mindfulness Cognitive Therapy Reduces Anxiety in Bipolar Patients." Psych Central News. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Apr. 2015.

Psychology, Journal Of Applied School. Cle "Mindfulness Training for Elementary School Students: The Attention Academy," by Maria Napoli, Paul Rock Krech, and Lynn C. Holley, Which (n.d.): n. pag. Stressbeaters. Arizona State University. Web. 5 Apr. 2015.

Schwartz, Katrina. "Low-Income Schools See Big Benefits in Teaching Mindfulness." MindShift. N.p., 17 Jan. 2014. Web. 05 Apr. 2015."Standards - View Standards by Subject Area and Grade Level or Course." Standards - View Standards by Subject Area and Grade Level or Course. N.p., n.d. Web. 05 Apr. 2015

"Staff Training Model." Mindfulness in Pre K-12 Education. N.p., n.d. Web. 25 Apr. 2015.

"State School Health Policy Database." NASBE. National Association of State Boards of Education, n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.

"What Is Mindfulness? | Mindful Schools: Online Courses for Learning Mindfulness and Teaching Mindfulness to K-12 Children and Adolescents." Mindful Schools RSS. N.p., n.d. Web. 29 Mar. 2015.



