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Mental Health and Mindfulness in Education

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A Literature Review Presented

in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of Master of Special Education

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Abstract

Many students struggle with mental health issues, which can cause intense classroom behaviors, such as, physical aggression, verbal outburst, physical refusals, and elopements. These behaviors are creating stressful learning environments for both teachers and students. Teachers are looking for more strategies to help them manage their classroom and create a positive learning environment. One strategy that has become more present in recent years is mindfulness. This literature review examines research that has been conducted on mindfulness interventions and practices and explores the connection between mindfulness and mental health, as well as, how they both affect classroom behaviors.

Mental Health and Mindfulness

Intense classroom behaviors are an everyday occurrence for many teachers and is it drastically affecting the amount of instruction students are able to receive. Around 10% of students struggle with their mental health (Rappaport & Minahan, 2020). Their state of mental health makes it hard for them to focus on their learning and regulate their emotions effectively (Rappaport & Minahan, 2020). Some students with the most intense behaviors are being identified as having Emotional and Behavior Disorder. Receiving consequences for their actions isn't enough for these students (Zolkoski & Lewis-Chiu, 2019). The lack of these skills leads to unexpected classroom behaviors. Teachers must find ways to help all students regulate their emotions, so that they can be part of a safe learning environment.

The problem is unexpected classroom behaviors are becoming more frequent and more intense. Academic tasks require students to have the ability to regulate emotions, so that they can concentrate, develop essential motivation, and control their impulsive thinking. (Franco et. al., 2016). In order for students to complete academic task they need to learn how to control their emotions through self-regulation.

The purpose of this literature review is to take a deeper look at the mental health of students and how mindfulness strategies affect them. The aim of mindfulness approaches is to enhance attention and emotional coping skills, which supports mental health (Viafora, Mathiesen, & Unsworth, 2014). It is a strategy that is being used in classrooms to help decrease problem behaviors. Mindfulness includes attention, intention, and attitude. It is fully taking in the environment around you in that present moment and not being worried about the past or future (Zolkoski & Lewis-Chiu, 2019). Mindfulness affects classroom behavior and performance.

This literature review will examine the mental health of students and behaviors that are being displayed, and then analyze the effects of mindfulness across various classroom settings. This literature review examines the connection between mindfulness and mental health and how they both affect classroom behaviors. The results of mindfulness research conducted with early childhood and elementary students, secondary students, and teachers were analyzed for the effectiveness of mindfulness practices. All the articles for this literature review are peer reviewed and current within the last ten years.

Mindfulness improves the mental health of students. This allows the students to cope with everyday stressors, therefore classroom behavior and academic performance is enhanced. When a person is being mindful, they intentionally regulate their behaviors, as opposed to acting on impulses (Kostova, et. al., 2019). When the behaviors and emotions of students are regulated, a positive learning environment can be cultivated.

This literature review will start by analyzing mental health and classroom behavior looking at attention-deficit hyperactive disorder, oppositional defiance disorder and conduct disorder, anxiety disorders, and mood disorders. Mindfulness based interventions has been known to improve mental health. The effects of mindfulness approaches in early childhood and elementary students, secondary students, and teachers will then be examined.

Review of the Literature

Mental Health & Classroom Behavior

Mental health plays a major role in today's education, because one out of five children experience mental health issues (Ball et. al., 2016). Research by Stewart, Klassen, & Hamza (2016) found that of the 20% of children who need to receive services and treatment for mental health, as much as 75% of the children receive no treatment. Ball et. al.'s (2016), research found that in some parts of the United States, two-thirds of children have experienced a traumatic life event prior to the age of 16. Research completed by Steward, Klassen, and Hamza (2012), found that children with mental health diagnosis are over 50% more likely to exhibit disruptive classroom behaviors than their peers with no mental health diagnosis (2016). Ball, et. Al., (2016) extends the research to say that if these issues with the mental health of students are unattended, poor academic achievement, chronic absenteeism, and disciplinary issues will occur (Ball et. al., 2016). Different mental health diagnosis can lead to various challenging behaviors. The diagnosis is broken down to clearly identify the specific behaviors that have been associated with each mental health diagnosis. The classroom behaviors associated with attention - deficit/hyperactivity disorder, oppositional defiance disorder and conduct disorder, anxiety disorders, and mood disorders are analyzed.

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder

Attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder affects 3-7% of children in school (Chimiklis, et. al., 2018). Impairments for the working memory, emotional functions, attention, and social performance are some of the core deficits that are associated with ADHD. (Chimiklis et al., 2018; Tarver, Daley, & Sayal, 2014). A child might experience forgetfulness and might also

struggle with planning and completing everyday task (Tarver, Daley, & Sayal, 2014). Following multiple step directions is often a challenge and impairments in emotional regulation are frequently present. Children with ADHD often show more outbursts of anger and frustration (Tarver, Daley, & Sayal, 2014). Deficits associated with ADHD can all greatly affect the ability of children with ADHD to perform successfully in the classroom.

Stewart, Klassen, and Hamza's (2012) case study was conducted to determine how different mental health diagnoses were related to classroom behavior. Of the 912 students sample size, students with attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorders were two times more like to display disruptive classroom behaviors as compared to their peers without a diagnosis (Stewart, Klassen, and Hamza, 2012). The disruptive classroom behaviors were a big concern, and often occurred at a high frequency in school. Disruptive classroom behaviors can cause the teacher and other students to feel stressed, and also potentially can lead to a referral to special education or other service (Hart et al., 2011).

ADHD is also known to be paired with other disruptive behavior disorders and mood disorders (Stewart, Klassen, & Hamza, 2016; Tarver, Daley, & Sayal, 2014). Research by Tarver, Daley, & Sayal, (2014) found that oppositional defiant disorder and conduct disorder are seen in as many as 50% of children who have been diagnosed with ADHD. Research conducted by Tarver, Daley, & Sayal (2014), found that in a sample size of 381 students with ADHD, 33% had an anxiety disorder and 50% of them also had a mood disorder. These mental disorders paired together leads to more behavioral and academic struggles in the classroom.

Oppositional defiance disorder and conduct disorder

Oppositional defiance disorder and conduct disorder are both behavior disorders that affect classroom behavior. Research by Blair, Leinbenluft, & Pine (2014), found that incessant

angry, argumentative and irritable behaviors are seen when a child has oppositional defiance disorder. Conduct disorder often develops, when a child has both oppositional defiance disorder and attention deficit-hyperactivity disorder. Very high levels of aggression and rule breaking behaviors were displayed (Blair, Leinbenluft, & Pine, 2014). These disruptive behavior disorders put students at a greater risk for displaying disruptive classroom behaviors. Research by Stewart, Klassen, & Hamza, (2016) found that like ADHD, these disorders also led to students being two times more likely than their none diagnoses classmates to engage disruptive classroom behaviors.

Anxiety Disorders

Distressing levels of anxiety are reported in 10- 20% of children and adolescents, and 6-10% of children, who are school aged, meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder diagnosis (Killu & Crundwell, 2016). According to Killu & Crundwell (2016), anxiety is felt by everyone at some point, but when it becomes severe and doesn't go away, the person is always in a negative state of worry, and avoid situations becoming self-defeating. Multiple behaviors can occur in the classroom when a student is suffering from anxiety. Perfectionism, expressing worry excessively, memory problems, irritability, over sensitivity, and erratic behaviors are displayed by those who are experiencing high levels of anxiety (Killu & Crundwell, 2016; Minahan & Rappaport, 2012).

According to the research completed by Stewart, Klassen & Hamza (2016), students with anxiety disorders have a 53.9% risk of displaying disruptive behaviors at school, while their peers without an anxiety disorder diagnosis are at a 41.7% risk. While there isn't much difference in the risk of disruption, levels of anxiety are constantly changing, which makes that behavior patterns very inconsistent and difficult to anticipate (Minahan & Rappaport, 2012).

Stewart, Klassen & Hamza (2016) found that unpredictable behaviors often lead to a reactive teacher response. The student is punished for their behaviors that are really the result of an underlying mental health issue, which increases the chance of poor school outcomes.

Mood Disorders

Depression (Gulley, Hankin, & Young, 2015), disruptive mood dysregulation disorder (Tapia & John, 2018), and bipolar disorder (Johnson, Johnson, & Walker, 2011) are all mood disorders that impact mental health. According to Johnson, Johnson & Walk (2011), of the one in five youth who have a mental, behavioral or emotional problem, one out of every eight have depression. Severe emotional problems, like bipolar disorder and disruptive mood dysregulation, are seen in one out of ten (Johnson, Johnson, & Walker, 2011). Gulley, Hankin, & Young (2015) found that mood disorders effect cognitive, occupational functioning, and interpersonal skills.

Mental health concerns are present in an estimated 20% of youth under the age of 18 and that percentage goes up to 25% for youth that live in an adverse environment (Reinke et al., 2011). The challenging behaviors that come with mental health issues can be very difficult (Zolkoski, & Lewis-Chiu, 2019). Mindfulness programs have been implemented in classrooms to help improve mental health. According to a systematic review completed by Sapthiage, Van Gordon, & Shonin (2019), mindfulness practice in schools led to improvements in the mental health of students. Resilience to mental illness was increased through the improvement of emotional regulation, social skills, coping skills, social emotional competence, optimism and mindfulness (Sapthiage, Van Gordon, & Shonin, 2019).

Mindfulness for Early Childhood and Elementary Students

Mindfulness research has been conducted in both early childhood and elementary settings. Various strategies have been implemented in classrooms to determine the effects of mindfulness on prosocial behaviors, hyperactivity, self-regulatory skills, stress, anxiety, and depression. Bazzano, Anderson, Hylton, and Gustat (2018), conducted mindfulness research on 20 third grade students, who were identified with symptoms of anxiety. The control group consisted of 32 students who continued their usually routines. The intervention group completed eight-weeks of a yoga and mindfulness program. Data from this study, showed an improvement of psychosocial and emotional quality of life in the students in the intervention group and showed decreased stress, negative emotional response and improved self-esteem (Bazzano, et. al., 2018).

Malboeuf-Hurtubise, Lacourse, Herba, Taylor, Amor (2017), had differing results when they conducted a study on mindfulness-based interventions with elementary students that had anxiety and depression. The results didn't allow them to conclude that mindfulness-based interventions helped decrease psychosocial adjustment issue in students with anxiety and depression disorders, because no significant difference was found in any of the variables examined (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, et. al., 2017). A mindfulness-based study was completed with three students grades 3rd and 4th and three teachers for an 8-week period with one 60-minute session per week. They were unable to determine if the mindfulness-based intervention had an impact on anxiety and depression during the study. The results indicated that mindfulness might have a short-term impact on students with internalized disorder but were unable to draw conclusions specifically for students with a generalized anxiety disorder (Malboeuf-Hurtubise, et. al., 2017).

Black and Fernando (2014), researched how mindfulness training affects classroom behavior in an ethnic minority elementary school. They used a sample size of 409 students. They conducted a pre-intervention, an immediate post intervention, and another post intervention seven-weeks after the training was complete. The students score increased in all four categories that were examined. The categories were paying attention, self-control, participation in activities, and caring and respect for others. The post intervention determined that not only were there improvements immediately following the training, but the improvements in the students' behaviors lasted up to seven weeks after the intervention was completed.

Similar results were found in a study completed by Van de Weijer-Bergsma, Langenberg, Brandsma, Oort, & Bogels (2012), with 208, 8 to 12-year-old, students received a mindfulness-based intervention on mental health and stress for six weeks. From the initial pretest to the follow up test, students reported an increase of bodily awareness, not hiding emotions, a sense of coherence, verbal sharing of emotions, and differentiating emotions. The results of the parents' follow up indicated that aggressive behaviors and anxiety symptoms decreased. More changes were reported at the follow up test than there were at the initial post-test. Researchers believed that it is due to the mindfulness continuing to be integrated into the students' lives even after the interventions were completed (Van de Weijer-Bergsma,2012).

Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, and Davison (2015) and Viglas and Periman (2017), explored the relationship between mindfulness and prosocial behavior. Both case studies were completed in early childhood settings and found similar results. The case studies both indicated that the students whom received the mindfulness intervention were more likely to share items with their peers. It was concluded by both studies that the mindfulness-based intervention improved prosocial behaviors within the classroom (Flook, et. al., 2015; Viglas & Periman, 2017).

Harpin, Rossi, Kim & Swanson (2016) conducted a ten-week mindfulness training in two 4th grade classrooms with a samples size of 36 students. The case study was conducted in an urban setting with a very diverse demographic. A seven-item survey was given at the end of training to measure the perception of mindfulness practices. One teacher reported that the students had improved their impulse control, showed self-awareness, related to peers better, and paid attention more (Harpin, et.al, 2016). The students in the treatment group also reported more positive behaviors, improved emotional regulation, and higher academic achievement scores. Harpin, Rossi, Kim & Swanson (2016) used another form of qualitative research, called Fasttrack Teacher Social Competence Survey, to measure the students' prosocial behaviors. The results indicated an increase in prosocial behaviors, emotional regulation, and academic competency.

Some early childhood and elementary students struggle with mental health issues. Mindfulness practices have been researched by multiple people to determine if mindfulness is an effective strategy to help students self-regulate and improve classroom behaviors. Results have shown it can be an effective intervention with early childhood and elementary students.

Mindfulness for Secondary Students

Mindfulness practices have been used on adolescents as a form of treatment in health clinic, research indicated various improvements for the patients. Practices in mindfulness led to improvements in negative coping, intrusive thoughts, anxiety, depression, rumination, emotional arousal, stress in interpersonal relationships, post-traumatic stress, and hostility (Sapthiang Van Gordon, and Shonin, 2018). These results indicate that mindfulness-based interventions in the could lead to similar results in secondary school settings. Various case studies have been

conducted to determine if mindfulness improves the mental health of students in secondary school settings.

Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni, & Milman (2018), conducted a case study to determine the long-term effects of mindfulness in three different schools. One of the schools in their study, implemented mindfulness for 13 years, another school that was examined had implemented it for one year, and the third school had no mindfulness practices integrated into the school. The three schools combined created a sample size of 646 students ages 9-13. The data gathered in this study indicated that the students who attended the school that had implemented mindfulness for 13 years, had better coping skills in exam stress, concentration, sleep, facing anger, and disappointments. The school who had implemented mindfulness for a year, showed that they used coping skills before a test, but all other areas showed a small variance with the school that had no mindfulness practices (Sheiman, et. al., 2018). The results of this study indicate that students who receive instruction in mindfulness over a span of multiple years developed better coping skills.

Similar results were found by Viafora and Mathiesen (2014), when researching the effect of mindfulness on middle school students and homeless students. The study examined 63 middle school students ages 11-13. The treatment group, which included 48 students with 15 of them current living or recently lived in homeless shelters, received a 45-minute mindfulness course once a week for an 8-week period that included mindful listening, mindful eating, and a discussion on practices for home (Viafora and Mathiesen 2014). All students in the treatment groups expressed that mindfulness helped them cope with stress and anger, much like the results in research by Sheinman, Hadar, Gafni, & Milman (2018), that showed an increase ability in coping with stress. Viafora and Mathiesen (2014), found that the students who were facing

homelessness were more favorable than those who were not. Students that are faced with homelessness might be experiencing more stress, traumatic experiences, aggressive behaviors, and emotional dysregulation, which potentially leads to greater benefits of mindfulness practices (Viafora and Mathiesen 2014).

The effects of mindfulness on adolescents' classroom behavior has been explored by multiple researchers. Rush, Golden, Mortenson, Albohn, & Horger (2017) examined on-task and off-task behaviors of students with Emotional Behavior Disorders and how mindfulness impacted them. The study was done with a sample size of 32, eight to thirteen years old students, with only four of them being girls. The intervention group, which consisted of fourteen students, received instruction from Heart Smart Curriculum. The on-task behavior increased for the treatment group, and the control group actually showed a decrease in on-task behavior (Rush, et. al., 2017)

In connection to examining on-task behaviors and mindfulness, Franco, Amutio, Lopez Gonzalez, Oriol, and Martinez-Taboada (2016), analyzed the effect of mindfulness on impulsivity and aggression level of adolescents. Twenty-seven students participated in this research with 14 of the students being in the control group and 13 of the students receiving weekly session for 10 weeks in a mindfulness practice called Meditation Fluir. In the program they worked on controlling thoughts, sensations, and feelings, and being aware in a passive way. Both groups took a pre and post-test that examined impulsivity and aggressiveness. A large decrease in the experimental group in all the dimensions of both impulsivity and aggressiveness was indicated by the data collected (Franco, et. al., 2016). The study demonstrates how lower rates of impulsivity, leads to an increase of on-task behaviors, which aligns with the Rush, Golden, Mortenson, Albohn, & Horger (2017) case study.

Research was conducted to determine how mindfulness affects students ages 11-15 with ADHD, which is characterized by impulsivity. Van de Weijer-Bergma, Formsa, de Bruin, & Bogels (2012), implemented an 8-week mindfulness training for students with ADHD and their parents. Ten adolescents and 19 adults participated in their research. A computerized attention test and a questionnaire was used to determine the effective on mindfulness on behavior, executive functioning, mindful awareness, fatigue, and happiness. The computerized attention test and questionnaire were used before, during, and after the intervention. The results indicated that the adolescents' internalizing and externalizing attention problems decreased, while the executive functioning improved the adolescent self-reporting questionnaire.

Mindfulness for Teachers

According to Haydon, Alter, Hawkins, and Theado (2019), various studies have indicated that teachers experience significant stress, because of classroom behaviors and emotion issues of the students that hinder their teaching. The significant stress has caused an impairment in the physical and mental health of teachers. Research has been conducted to determine the impact of mindfulness interventions on teachers.

Gouda, Luong, Schmidt, and Bauer (2016), examined the effectiveness of mindfulness on both teachers and students. In a sample size of 29 teachers, 14 were placed in an intervention group and the other 15 were in the waitlist group. Interpersonal problems were reduced for the group of teachers that were in the intervention group, and there was a significant increase in self-reported mindfulness, as well as, a decrease in depression, stress, and anxiety, but a significant level of change was not present (Gouda, et al.,2016).

Studies have shown a correlation between mindfulness and the reduction of teacher burnout. Research conducted by Sun, Wang, Wang, Du, and Zhang (2019), examined the effect

that mindfulness had on the burn out of special education teachers. Three-hundred and seven special education teachers that were in charge of many IEPs were participants in this study. A questionnaire called the Five Facet Mindfulness Questionnaire was completed by the teachers. The study conclude that mindfulness practices help reduce the risk of teacher burn out by 17% (Sun, et. al., 2019). Research completed by Amana-Green (2020), saw a reduction of the risk of burnout for teachers that were involved in mindfulness practices. The case study included 144 K-12th grade teachers who completed two mindfulness-based interventions and a brief survey that included the Mindfulness in Teaching Scale and the Professional Quality of Inventory. The results of the survey concluded intrapersonal mindfulness may be a protective factor for teachers in the classroom by reducing stress levels, which leads to a decreased the risk of burnout.

Gold, Smith, Hopper, Herne, and Tansey (2010) researched how mindfulness impacted the stress, depression, and anxiety of nine primary teachers and two teaching assistance. The baseline data that was collected determined that most of the participants were experiencing emotional distress. After participating in a Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction intervention, most of the participants experienced having less stress, anxiety and depression (Gold, et. al, 2010).

Research completed by Crain, Schonert-Reichl, Roeser (2017), found significant improvements in the mental health of teachers who completed a mindfulness training. One hundred and thirteen elementary and secondary teachers participated in an 11-week workplace mindfulness training. The results of the study showed an improvement in multiple areas. Mindfulness decreased the amount to time teachers spent thinking about work at home. The teachers felt more satisfied at work and home, reported being in better moods, and their sleep improved (Crain, et. al., 2017).

Teaching is a stressful career. The social-emotional demands are affecting the mental health of educator. Forty percent of teachers quit teaching within 5-years of joining the profession (Amamn-Green, 2020). Mindfulness has been proven to decrease stress, anxiety and depression (Gold, et. al.,2010), increase sleep quality (Crain, et. al.,2017), and decrease the risk of burn out (Sun et. al., 2019).

Conclusion

There is an astounding amount of research on the mental health of youth and the implementation of mindfulness in classrooms to help improve the mental health of the students and increase expected behaviors. This literature review has shown various mental health issues that youth are experiencing, and examined how the mental health issues can lead to explosive classroom behaviors. The results of mindfulness research conducted with early childhood, elementary, and secondary students, and teachers were analyzed for the effectiveness of mindfulness practices.

The findings of the literature review revealed that mindfulness-based interventions are an effective way to increase expected classroom behavior and decrease mental health issues. A positive effect was seen across all age groups that were examined in this literature review. From early childhood students to secondary students, classroom behaviors were decreased and the ability to regulated emotions and stress were increased. The mental health of teachers improved after practicing mindfulness.

The findings in this literature review correlated with a review of literature research that was conducted in 2019, by Kostova, Levin, Lorberg, and Ziedonis. The research they conducted reported qualitative findings that indicated that mindfulness-based interventions are effective for students with a mental health diagnosis. The findings revealed common themes of managing

stress, feeling less worried, more relaxed, emotional regulation, and more self-awareness (Kostova,2019). A Meta-review, conducted by Soulakova et.al. (2019), supported the finding of this literature review. Their findings indicated a decrease in student anxiety, depression, problem behaviors, and problems in executive function and attentions.

Further research needs to be conducted on the effects of mindfulness with high school students. Several studies were conducted in middle school, but a limited number in high school. Another area that needs to be researched in greater depth is longevity. Longevity was only included in one study; therefore, more research needs to be conducted to see the long-term effects of mindfulness-based practices in classrooms. Conducting more quantitative research in all areas could be beneficial, because a majority of the research conducted was qualitative,

Limitations were discovered when conducting this literature review. One limitation was that a majority of the research conducted on mental health and mindfulness was completed in a clinical setting, and a limited amount of research in classroom settings. Effects of mindfulness in a classroom setting has been researched more in preschools and elementary schools, which led to a limited amount of information on the effects of mindfulness in secondary settings. Another limitation is that there was a small amount of research on specific mental health issues in the preschool and elementary settings, which could potentially be due to the fact that the average age of start of a mental illness is 12 to 24 years old (Sapthiang, Gordon, & Shonin, 2018).

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