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High school swiss students' perception of five minutes' mindfulness meditations at the beginning of their 45 minutes' lesson

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Introduction

Mindfulness is a growing, fashionable business and seems very fashionable. Thus, typing it on Google will result in more than 200 million entries. It is found today in a great variety of fields: from neurology to coaching, sports, psychology and of course, education. As for the latter, it will show six billion entries on Google. Quite interestingly, education and mindfulness go quite well together (Hyland, 2014). The impact of mindfulness meditation on students has been demonstrated by many authors: on the one hand, it increases well-being (Black, 2015), on the other hand, it improves academic results (Lu, Huang, & Rios, 2017). Moreover, it has a direct effect on executive functions, related to learning skills (Jha, Stanley, Kiyonaga, Wong, & Gelfand 2010). Finally, research emphasised that even short sessions show beneficial effects (Calma-Biring & Gurung, 2017).

However, few studies have focused on teenagers' perspective on mindfulness in a school context. Thus, the present study investigates the impact of a short practise at the beginning of a lesson, two or three times a week, through a self-reported questionnaire addressing students' perceptions on how mindfulness influenced their learning abilities, their well-being and their mindfulness skills.

Objectives

With projects like Mindfulschools, Smiling Mind or Mindfulness in School Project, Mindfulness is a big phenomenon in many schools around the Anglo-Saxon world. It is even encouraged by the NHS (National Health Service, 2018) and the British Government. Indeed, 370 schools are going to take part in one of the largest trial in the world. Until 2021, pupils will benefit from mindfulness actions (British Government, 2019).

Studies on teenagers and mindfulness are lacking. The very first meta-analysis on mindfulness interventions with young people from age 6 to age 21, was published in 2015 by Zoogman and colleagues. Nevertheless, the latter does not focus on teens specifically or on the impact of mindfulness in schools. Moreover, few studies have yet analysed how mindfulness meditation impacts class management and teaching from a student's perspective. As such, the main goal of the present study is to determine students' perceptions of a five minutes' mindfulness meditation at the beginning of a 45 minutes' lesson, twice or three

times a week. More precisely, questions at the end of a six-month intervention targeted the impact on the students' learning skills, their well-being and their mindfulness skills.

Methodology

The project started on January 29, 2018 and ended on June 19, 2018 in a secondary school (ECCG Martigny). Three classes of 15 to 22 years old students (N=65, 89% female) answered 14 questions on a Likert scale organised into 5 categories: 0= strongly disagree, 2= disagree, 3= neutral, 4= agree, 5= strongly agree. The 14 items evaluated (1) knowledge and understanding of the purpose of mindfulness in and out the classroom, (2) meditation's contribution to well-being, (3) positive impact of such practice on attention and (4) the development of mindfulness skills such as observation. One closed-ended question and seven opened-ended questions completed the self-report questionnaire.

Results

Mindfulness and school

On average, six students out of ten had never meditated before and only 46% had never heard about mindfulness before. Most students seemed to agree that mindfulness is useful at school with 76% answers 3, 4 or 5 on the Likert Scale; 23% agreed to come after class to meditate; 60% felt more focused during the following lesson and only 14% could not see any impact on their attention.

Mindfulness and well-being

Meditation was enjoyed by 80% of the sample and 12% was neutral about it. Roughly the same results were found when they were asked if the students felt more relaxed after the practice. Nine students out of ten agreed that the teacher was calmer after guiding them. Almost 80% of the teenagers observed that if the teacher was less stressed, so were they.

Mindfulness skills

More than 60% could see when their minds wandered, were more aware of their bodily sensations, and could come back to their breathing when losing focus; 53% said they could pinpoint the emotions affecting them. Meditation at school motivated 17% of the sample to do it at home and 24% talked about mindfulness at home and recommended it.

Open-ended questions

When the students had to define mindfulness, most of them talked about being self-aware, aware of their ideas, bodies or emotions, relaxing, focusing, developing the brain, taking some time out, getting ready to learn. Three students said they did not know what it was. After practising in the classroom, they noticed being more efficient at school, calmer, more relaxed, less anxious, more focused during the following classes, happier, more motivated. They also noticed a quieter class, a better motivation and connection with inner-self. Some students said they could identify their emotions and deal with them. Three students said they did not know.

One student out of four did not perceive any impact on his private lives. Two already meditated. As for the others, they acknowledged emotion regulation, focusing, serenity, improvement of sports skills, calm, better sleep and the ability to take a break during the day.

Discussion

Mindfulness and school

Half of the students agreed that meditation is useful in the classroom. The fact that mindfulness and meditation go well together was shown by several researchers (Hyland, 2014; Kuyken et al., 2013; Felver, Celis-de Hoyos, Tezanos, & Singh, 2016). Only one student thought teacher was not more relaxed after leading the mindfulness session in the classroom. 89% felt more relaxed if the teacher was more relaxed. This fact recalls Oberle and Schonert-Reichl's findings (2016). According to them, the teacher's stress is contagious. As such, it can be hypothesised that if a teacher is calm (and perceived as such), students will be calmer too. As for their attention capacity, only nine students said they did not see any difference with or without mindfulness. This is similar to what was found in studies (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007; Norris, Creem, Hendler, & Kober, 2008; Moore & Malinowski, 2008).

Mindfulness and well-being

Eight students out of ten enjoyed meditating, 75% acknowledged more tranquillity, and 20% said they were willing to meditate after class. Open-ended questions also revealed that they acknowledged serenity and better sleep. Meditation apparently brings well-being to the students. Researchers, including Baer and Lykins (2011), found similar results.

Mindfulness skills

About 80% of the students claimed to be more aware of their emotions, able to focus on their breathing when the mind wandered and could have a greater body perception. These results are similar to what was already found (Baer & Lykins, 2011; Silverstein, Brown, Roth, & Britton, 2011). These results suggest that even within a short period and with short sessions, students can develop mindfulness skills.

Limits

These results have to be taken with caution. Firstly, the only assessment tool used in the present study is retrospective self-report. Given the potential impacts, a randomized research with a larger sample size would be necessary.

Conclusion

In her introduction to mindfulness, Estelle Fall (2016) does not understand why there are so few empirical data on mindfulness meditation impact on students. Data on meditation and teenagers are even fewer. Thus, every new evidence is crucial and it is important to concretely study this phenomenon in secondary schools. The results found here are encouraging: the students felt happier, more relaxed, more focused and more self-aware. Even though some researchers have not found significant links between mindfulness and health (Chiesa & Serreti, 2009), many studies show similar impacts (Grossma, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004; Khoury et al., 2013; Zoogman, Hoyt, Goldber, & Miller, 2014).

The British example with the Mindfulness Initiative (The Mindfulness Initiative, 2018), the NHS and many evidence-based data including this study should be considered by the Swiss Government. Indeed, the fact that mindfulness helps the class being calmer, and influences both subjective well-being and learning skills, should trigger a greater implementation of

mindfulness in schools. Thus, it could be brought through teacher education or through mindfulness professionals coming to schools. An easier way could be to use an app (Head-space, Petit Bambou, etc.) or other mean, and have the students meditate for a short moment.

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