HOLMES, LIINA ANTONINA

MEDITATION IN THE CONTEXT OF HOLISTIC EDUCATION IN TERMS OF AFFECTIVE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

All of the different motivating aspects for this thesis essay have come together slowly over the past 5 or so years of my life. While teaching was something that I have been engaging in for most of my life from a small child as a part of who I am, I did not realize that it was something I’d love to build a lifelong, fulfilling career out of until I had explored other career options in other fields. Once deciding I wanted to become a teacher, it still took a long time for me to realize what type of teacher I would aspire to be, and to learn enough about education to be able to make educated decisions as to what I believed in, and what my personal philosophy of education would become.

The drive behind understanding meditation and the possibilities in the classroom stem from a personal passion for finding stability and happiness in our very intense and sometimes chaotic world. My background is plagued with emotional breakdowns, anxiety attacks, confusion and depression. Although as an adult, I have learned ways of coping and helping myself, as a child and teen, I very much struggled with how I felt about my life and the world that I lived in. Treating symptoms of a disheveled life and living within the chaos of crossing realities of the people around me only raised more questions and more problems to try and solve. Realizing what an uphill battle it is to try to control all aspects of my life and the colliding lives of everything around me was made me question the best option for happiness. I figured there must be something out there that might help calm and settle my mind, and in turn ripple out and calm and settle my life. It was not by accident that I found meditation nor are the positive developments in a variety of areas in my life which meditation has helped.

As meditation aided me in seeing things in my life more clearly, I asked myself why I was not taught the practice of meditation in school, or as a child. The more the practice helped me sort my life out and relieved unpleasant inflictions such as anxiety and depression, the incredible power of meditation became more apparent to me. Eventually it was clear to me that there was a link between my personal happiness and meditation. I look back on a variety of my life experiences and can not help but to question whether meditation practice could have helped me in
those situations, despite being much younger and less experienced. My interest in meditation stems from subjective experiences, so I began to wonder how common the benefits that I have experienced were among other people. I began thinking about the possibilities of meditation, and the supporting evidence.

During the first years of studying education, I was introduced to several learning theories, I got slightly more familiar with humanistic and holistic views of education and became very interested in the integral part that happiness, and mental well-being plays in the effectiveness and overall richness of one’s path through an education system. For an essay on humanistic learning, I read “Teaching Happiness and well-being in schools” by Ian Morris (2009) that very much made me realize the importance of a humanistic and holistic approach in the classroom. This idea of happiness and well-being being important in schools began to pop up in my mind in many subjects such as inclusion, compassion, differentiation, ethics, teaching philosophies etc., that it was naturally becoming something I was thinking about as a vital part of education. I then began to think about meditation in terms of age, background, situation, context, and its accessibility. Finally the idea that meditation within schools could help students, or the question rather, of if it could help students in school became a focal point of interest. The hope is that this literature review will provide a basis for further empirical research to be conducted for master’s thesis.

As meditation was missing from my education and childhood, and as it has been a godsend since finding it, a genuine desire to know about the evidence surrounding meditation is the motivation of this thesis. This thesis attempts to answer the following questions:

1. **How does meditative practice support holistic education?**
2. **How does meditative practice support affective and social development?**

How meditation relates to holistic education, is woven throughout this thesis after discussing holistic education in depth in section 2.1. The correlations between meditation and affective and social development is discussed in detail in section 2.2.
1.2 Purpose

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the possibilities meditation and mindfulness practice might present to educators interested in facilitating holistic education. As we shift to search for different answers to solve the problems in education, a more holistic approach has become an area of intrigue. As we are let down by traditional ways of teaching we realize education is more than just the transmission of information, and that more holistic approaches to education is an attractive topic that is trending and becoming popular.

This thesis attempts to identify and examine aspects of social and affective learning and development through the practice of mindfulness meditation. Plenty of evidence supports mindfulness, as well as the support it can provide learners in terms of attention, focus, stress, and anxiety among many others. (Yeganeh, 2009) The less explored side of mindfulness and meditation, which has to do with emotions, spirituality and our “inner world” in general lacks literature and exploration in the educational context. This less understood side of meditation and mindfulness is often an issue that leads to the disregard of the practices all together. Providing a perspective less frequented helps to build a stronger foundation for further research.

While meditation and mindfulness are ancient practices, they have only recently become a topic of discussion in education in the last 20 years as the interests in scientific studies have provided evidence of the benefits. (Braboszcz, et al., 2010) At the moment due to the newness of the scientific research into meditation and mindfulness practice, the research into these practices in the context of education, while existent, are not abundant. Meditation, mindfulness and mindfulness in the classroom are all relevant, trending themes across many fields. The more attention a field of research receives, the more opportunities are created for further studies and research, thus another voice in the discussion is of value. Another purpose of this research is to inspire further empirical research ideas and questions for further research of my own.

1.3 Concepts

Concepts discussed in this thesis include: holistic education, social affective domains of development, and meditation. According to John Hare (2010) holistic education focuses on the “absolute fullest development of the person.” While one specific definition of holistic education
does not exist, the general consensus is that it is an educational philosophy centered around nurturing the development of the whole human being. Meditation similar to holistic education has broad interpretations and definitions. In this thesis the psychological definition is used. From a psychological perspective *meditation* is defined as directing our thoughts from distractions, to a specific focal point. (Davis, 2011) This focal points can vary. Schreiner (2010) describes *spirituality* as the “realization that the individual is part of the whole,” he continues to say that that spiritual experiences “bring about love, compassion, joy, humility and interrelatedness.” Picard et al., (2004) define the *affective* domain of development and learning as relating to emotion, caring, and motivation. *Social* development refers to the development of skills and understanding in social relationships and interactions. (Huitt, 2011)

### 2. Holistic Education and Meditation

This chapter discusses holistic education, related theories, and meditation. How meditation relates to both holistic education and social and affective learning is explored in depth through scientific research in the sections within 2.2.

**2.1 Holistic Education & Learning theories**

In order to begin to understand where meditation might find its place in education, we must first form a deeper understanding of holistic learning and education, as well as the aims of this philosophy. Several themes are present within holistic education, as it is a view of education that considers all parts of the human experience. Holistic education is comprised of a wide variety “philosophical orientations and pedagogical practices.” (Mahoudi et al., 2012, p.178) As Ron Miller (2000), one of the prominent voices in the field of holistic education reasons, “holistic education is not to be defined as a particular method or technique; it must be seen as a paradigm, a set of basic assumptions and principles” that we as educators put into practice in a variety of ways, depending on the context.

Holistic education came about in the “mid 1980’s” in response to the one sided nature of traditional education, based more around knowledge and academic achievement through teacher centered teaching and learning. A big picture approach to education is used in holistic education
instead of a “fragmented” approach that might without noticing neglect parts of human experience. Morris, (2009) describes what focus on academic achievement does to education by saying, that “there is a vacuum in education that is stretched open by the emphasis on academic learning and measured outcomes and this vacuum is what makes it hard for many children to realize their own value and to discover their own meaning in life.” (p.199) This simply means that by placing such an emphasis on academic achievement, many of the great gifts and potential that are not valued in academics, go unnoticed and therefore go under developed, causing unfavorable outcomes of education, leaving many unfulfilled and unhappy. Holistic education fights this notion of education focusing on academic learning and achievement. This by no means implies that academic performance is neglected or uninvited in holistic learning. A holistic perspective on education merely means that we consider much more than just the academic aspects of learning.

Holistic education, a philosophical movement, according to Mahoudi et al., (2012), centers on the idea that education should not feed materialistic ideals of success and achievement, but instead be inclusive of all aspects of the human experience, such as spirituality and “a holistic view of reality.” (p.178) The goal is to develop students in a way that helps them reach their full potential in all areas of life, not only academic life. This takes into account the physical, intellectual, spiritual, emotional, social, and aesthetic aspects of us as humans, and the connection we as individuals have to one another, as well as all other living beings within the context of the world that we share. (p.178) “Different disciplines of knowledge, different ways of knowing, reason, emotions,” and the connection between our “inner and outer world” are explored within holistic education. (p.178-179) “The core focus of the holistic learning process is not simply the transmission of knowledge, skills, values and norms but rather the transformation of these into a heuristic base for acting.” (Wardekker & Miedema, 2001) As explained by Mahoudi et al., (2012), holistic education is based on the fundamental idea that a human’s search for identity, meaning, and purpose in life can be nurtured through connectedness of the whole human experience. (p.179)

“Interconnectedness” or “wholeness” within an individual and our shared realities is a general theme in holistic education. (p.179) (Hall, 2014) Education that acknowledges the whole human, including the inner aspects, lends itself to a more fulfilling and meaningful learning experience
that equips us with a foundation for the moment we are in, as well as for the future to come. (Hall, 2014) Miller (2006) states that “Holistic educators are convinced that the further evolution of civilization and human consciousness requires a renewed measure of respect and reverence for the inner life of the growing person.” (p.102) This seems like a very grand idea and aim for education, and for some might feel like it is outside the scope of what education should strive for. However when we explore the concept of our spirituality it becomes apparent that development in this area of our experience is important to live a happy and fulfilling life. Once we can see this, it is more questionable as to why we do not, generally speaking, aim to develop this side of us in schools. This thesis attempts to draw out and explore aspect of the “inner world” that we all have. This exploration of the “inner world” refers to themes of wholeness, interconnectedness, spirituality, emotions, caring, empathy, and compassion as well as overall happiness.

Morris (2006) says that wholeness implies “that everything in the universe is interconnected to everything else.” (p.182) Holistic education, learning, and teaching is about wholeness. Wholeness is the idea that “each element in our body is interconnected and our bodies are connected to all that surrounds us,” and that, “these interconnections form the whole.” Wholeness refers to recognizing the interconnected nature of experience and the multidimensionality of human beings. (Miller, 2006, p.156) Wholeness includes the less seen aspects of our lives which take place inside, such as thoughts, emotions, and the entire world we build inside in response to the external world. We tend to focus on external parts of our lives. Acknowledging and nurturing all side of the human being is essential to fulfilling our fullest potentials. (Miller, 2006, p.156) While wholeness implies that we cannot take the human out of the context of earth, nor can we separate parts of the human while still achieve fulfilling lifelong learning, for the sake of this thesis and the analysis of the shared themes between holistic education and meditation, we single out certain aspects, mostly to do with the inner aspect of our human experience, while maintaining the understanding that everything is a whole. This wholeness is broken down into our inner world, outer world, and the connection between the two.
2.1.1 Transmission, Transaction & Transformative Learning Theories

All education, holistic included, should of course be contextual and serve the specific needs of the students. This means that there is no “one model” of holistic education. It is simply a “direction” that many different roads lead to, with the specific destination varying person to person. Most of what we are taught in schools is connected to society and the lives of adults already living in the said society. We pass down “knowledge” we think is useful to our children and pupils in hopes that the knowledge we believe to be valuable will help them in the world that we are familiar with. This type of teacher centered learning, or the traditional type that most of us are familiar with, is called transmission learning/teaching. Generally there are three main ways we view learning. Transmission, transaction and transformative learning. Transmission learning refers to traditional methods of learning where the learning is teacher centered. Transaction learning is based on the idea that learners construct their own knowledge and ideas through inquiry based learning and teaching. Transformative learning focuses on the inner world of the learner, and develop this world, transforming them to become aware of the impact they have on themselves and the environment they interact with. (Miller, 2006 p.102) (Russell, 1997 )While holistic education incorporates all three, the focus is placed on transformative learning.

Miller (2006) notes that traditional or transmission learning is not obsolete and has its role, but needs to be accompanied by what he calls ‘timeless learning’. (p.3) Timeless learning refers to skills and knowledge that we can build upon, and use in a variety of ways to help us continue to learn and develop throughout our lives. (p.4) A wonderful, and somewhat extreme example of timeless learning is the story of Hellen Keller, and how the things she learned completely changed her perception and experience of life. Timeless learning is a part of holistic learning, as they both strive to develop each human being to their full potential. Although holistic way of educating and learning is not defined by one way of teaching and learning, it is inherently student centered because it is focused on the student’s growth in all ways. In order to address each individual student’s growth and development, appropriately the approach must be student centered. (Mahoudi et al., 2012, p.179)
2.1.2 Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivist learning theory suggests that learners construct their knowledge based on their experiences and perceptions. (Powell & Kalina, 2009) Meaning is constructed individually through the processing of our thoughts and experiences. This theory asserts that learning is simply constructing meaning from our interactions with the world. Deep understanding and development are at the center of constructivism. (Fosnot & Perry, 1999) Deep understanding and development are themes in both holistic education and is supported by meditation practice. The following sections discuss how scientific research has shown meditation practice to support the before mentioned social and affective domains of development.

2.2 Meditation and Mindfulness

The following section discusses meditation and mindfulness as well as how they relate to affective and social learning. Meditation, like holistic education, is an umbrella term. Meditation in simple terms refers to the practice of transforming the mind to be in a specific state of consciousness. Different types of meditative practices have different goals in transforming the state of mind but all center around the goal of a happier, more fulfilling life.

Meditation has been used by many civilizations and is thought to have been practice long before religion or recorded history in forms of chants and singing. (Braboscz, et al., 2010) In the 20th century meditation has moved away from being a religious practice, to something that has intrigued the west as a way to help us cope with the trials and stresses of everyday life. It has become a topic of interest, studies and research in the fields of psychology, medicine, and more recently, education. (Trasselard, 2014)

According to Morris, (2009), since the 1980’s thousands of studies have been conducted showing the effectiveness in providing benefits of “reduced stress, increased awareness and control over emotional state, emotional management, happiness, improved immune system and improved thinking.” Lots of evidence shows us how powerful meditation is in inducing “relaxation and positive emotions.” (p.183) Ott et al., (2011) found that while many types of meditation
practice focus on specific mental development, the overall benefits of meditation are not dependent on the specific type. Even though meditation is a wonderful asset to our development as humans, it is not a “cure-all,” nor is it a solution to all issues. (Miller, 1981, p.70)

Meditation does not teach us one specific skill or a set of knowledge with specific application. Some might argue that this makes meditation practice less important in education, or a waste of time because the application of it is vague and the results are very subjective. This argument can be very valid if the perspective on education is very traditional and teacher centered, and not holistic. Instead of a piece of knowledge, mindfulness is a practice of a mindset, or a state of being which can have an impact on multiple areas of learning and life. This, some might argue is even more valuable than a piece of information or a piece of knowledge. The value given to meditative practice in the context of a classroom depends on other values within the educators or institution’s educational philosophy and practices.

While many types of meditation exist, the following are the most common and well known types. *Body scan* meditation helps us get out of the rushing thoughts we may experience. Focus is placed on the body. This practice often starts from focus on the very top of the head. First becoming aware, and then consciously relaxing this part of the body. Moving from the head down to the neck, shoulders etc. until the tip of the toes. Each step of the way focus should first be on simply witnessing the part of the body. Followed by noting any tension or pain, and finally consciously letting go and relaxing. (Miller, 2006, p. 42) *Mantra* meditation is focusing on a repeated word or a short sentence. First stating the mantra out loud rhythmically, then begin repeating it silently. It should begin to feel as if the mantra is flowing on its own and you are simply observing it. This helps the mind relax and allow for openness. The idea is to let the mantra flow as fast, slow, loud, or soft as it does, without judgement, just focus on allowing the mantra to flow. This meditation practice can also help with insomnia, as the rhythm of the mantra we observe allows us to relax and drift to sleep. (Miller, 2006, p.44) *Visualization* meditation “attempts to elicit images that can foster positive growth and awareness.” Miller (2006) states that what we visualize in our minds has a connection to our bodies. When tested, asking someone to imagine or visualize themselves running, tiny contractions could be detected in their muscles. Similarly, visualizing relaxing things, things that make us happy, or upset all effect out
emotions. Miller also cites Murphy (1992) who argues that a plethora of studies show that imagery, or visualization practice shows benefits for people struggling with a variety of afflictions such as “depression, anxiety, insomnia, psychosomatic illnesses,” among many more. (p.45) Whereas all of these types of meditation can be put to use in the classroom, this thesis focuses on mindfulness meditation.

Mindfulness meditation is a type of meditation that centers around focusing the mind on the present moment. This can be applied to everyday tasks such as eating. While eating and practicing mindfulness we would not let our mind wander, and instead we would focus on eating – focusing on the taste of the food, being grateful for said food, etc. Being present in the moment. Mindfulness helps us create a bridge between everyday life and meditative practice. (Miller, 2006, p.78-79) Mindfulness is a universal skill that teaches us to simply draw attention to what we are doing right now and to notice the thoughts that arise as they do so. Mindfulness is essentially drawing attention to one point of focus. The breath is often used as a common point of focus (Morris, 2009, p.180-181) Dr. Britta Hölzel, a neuroscientist states that, “People practicing mindfulness meditation showed improvements in attention regulation, body awareness, emotion regulation (including reappraisal and exposure, extinction, and reconsolidation), and change in perspective on the self” when compared to participants that did not practice mindfulness meditation. (2011) Mindfulness reduces stress and anxiety (Morris, 2009, p.183) (Miller, 2006) Based on the a study conducted by Kabat-Zinn, Mindfulness based stress reduction (MBSR) is practiced in over 200 U.S. medical facilities to effectively treat stress, depression and anxiety. (Morris, 2009, p.183) Mindfulness lets our see what we are attached to and attempt to let it go by allowing us to become the observer of our thoughts, helping us perceive a variety of human experiences from a new, or different perspective. (Miller, 2006, p.31)

This chapter explores meditation in more depth, along with the connections it has to social and affective learning.

2.2.1 Empathy

“Empathy is the ability to feel another person’s emotional state” while sympathy is putting yourself in another person’s shoes, without connection to the person’s feelings. Morris (2009) explains that empathy emerges in the first 5 years of life as we begin to form relationships, but can
continue to be developed into adult life. (p.139) Professor Tania Singer of University of Zurich conducted an experiment demonstrates what the brain looks like when it when it empathizes. The experiment showed a couple an arrow on a screen in front of them that showed which of the two would be shocked by a small electrical charge, helping them anticipate who will feel pain. When one would get shocked, the other’s brain also lit up in the region that processes pain. This showed that the same part of the brain is active when feeling pain ourselves, as when we empathize. (Morris, 2009, p.193) While empathy is important to social development and relationships in general due to the fact that it allows us to understand others better, when paired with altruism can have real positive implications for human connections. Empathy is related to altruism. Altruism refers to the selfless aid, or helping of others. An experiment conducted in 1989 by Leslie Brother done with monkey’s demonstrated empathy driven altruism. In the experiment the monkeys were trained to anticipate a shock by being played a noise before being shocked with electricity. The monkeys were provided with a lever to push to turn off the sound. This trained the monkeys to associate the sound with pain, and the lever with ending the pain. A pair of the trained monkeys were placed in neighboring cages with a window to view each other, both with levers to stop the noise. The noise was played and only one monkey could hear it, but the neighboring monkey, who saw the fear on the other monkeys face, pushed the lever to relieve the other monkey of pain. This demonstrated empathy driven altruism. (Morris, 2009, p.142) This study showed the connection between empathy and the very real reactions we naturally have when we are aware of another being feeling something, including suffering. Granted, the experiment was done using monkeys, however, we as humans possess the capacity for empathy and altruistic thinking and actions on a higher level. To understand how mindfulness relates to and encourages empathy, we must understand that empathy stems from self-compassion. A study by Kingsbury (2009) examining 127 participants and their relation to empathy showed a direct correlation between self-compassion and empathy for others. This study also showed the correlation between mindfulness and self-compassion. Mindfulness cultivates non-judgement of our own thoughts and feelings, creating more understanding and compassion for ourselves. This extends in turn to our connection to others. Compassion and empathy both play key roles in our relationships, which mindfulness supports.
2.2.2 Compassion

The mutual understanding of interconnectedness we feel with other beings who, like us, want to be happy and avoid suffering is compassion. (Miller, 2006, p.60) Meditation practice nurtures the development of compassion toward all beings. (Morris, 2009, p.185) While compassion and empathy both require one to feel what another feels, and identify with another, compassion involves a stronger feeling of interconnectedness. (Miller, 2006, p.60) Development of compassion dramatically increases our ability to see the world positively”. (Morris, 2009, p.186) While most of us can agree that compassion is a positive attribute, compassion and love aren’t considered priorities within education. (Ott, 2006, p. 59) Compassion is a natural human characteristic and while we tend to be compassionate of the people close to us, such as our friends and family, we sometimes fail to be compassionate of beings we do not have a personal connection to. (Miller, 2006, p.60) Miller argues that “Compassion is a verb, which he describes as “movement of the heart”. (Miller, 2006, p.61)

To demonstrate one way in which mindfulness develops compassion and empathy, Matthieu Ricard (2006) explains an experiment conducted by Paul Ekman of the University of California demonstrating the overwhelming activity that was detected in the left neo cortex of a participant who practiced mindfulness. He continues to explain that when 5000 participants were tested in recognizing universal facial expressions, subjects that practiced mindfulness performed better in the task. Universal facial expressions were flashed on a screen for a fraction of a second, and participants were asked to identify the expression. In this study the people who practiced mindfulness were tested against people who did not, and found that they were far better at recognizing facial expressions. Recognizing facial expressions is linked to higher levels of empathy and compassion. This study demonstrated how mindfulness helps us recognize how others are feeling, and thus guide us in interactions with others, hopefully giving us a way to form more genuine, meaningful connections. Feeling empathy and compassion are wonderful, however, when partnered with action they can have significant impacts on our lives. Empathy and compassion can also lead us to behave in a way that significantly effects the emotional state of others.

Morris references the research of Jonathan Heidt which implies that there is an “emotional state” he calls “elevation.” This feeling is characterized by joy, deep gratification, and is experienced
when someone witnesses “moral beauty” such as stories of enormous self-sacrifice or compassion - inducing a warm, fuzzy pleasant feeling often accompanied by tearing up eyes and a feeling of relief and calmness. (Morris, 2009, p.193) According to scientific research, oxytocin is released during “elevated” experiences, which is a chemical released in the brain that helps us bond with others. (Morris, 2009, p.193) Acts of moral beauty move us, or in other words acts of moral beauty can stimulate a physical, emotional and cognitive experience, which stimulates the desire for human bonding. (Morris, 2009, p.193)

2.2.3 Emotional Regulation

In a study conducted by Ott, et al., (2011), which examined the grey matter in the regions of the brain associated with emotional regulation found that stark differences were detected between people that practiced meditation, compared to people who did not. According to Morris, (2009), “emotions are reactions to our perception of the world.” While simply performing the act of meditation does not induce intense positive emotions and thinking, it gives us the power to recognize and take hold of our emotions, to bring about positive thinking and feelings more often, and in more ways. (Morris, 2009, p.185) Mindfulness encourages open-mindedness, philosophical thinking, and questioning our perception of reality. Philosophical thinking and practice prompts us to ask questions about what we experience in our lives and encourage us to spot thinking patterns to avoid getting consumed by them. (Morris, 2009, p.199) The way that we feel is important because it drives our decision making and the decisions we make then drive our emotions, and so on. Being able to induce emotions that help us make good decisions can lend itself to us in a variety of ways. When we are in a positive emotional space, we tend to make decisions differently than when we are in a negative one. (Morris, 2009, p.184) How many times have we as individuals felt specific way simply because of how we perceived something we come in contact with? This could be an interaction, an observation or any other interaction involving ourselves and the world. We can argue that this is a problem we cannot fix, because we all have free will and the freedom to perceive the world as we wish. I agree with this, however, the skill of being aware of how we are feeling, and the skill of questioning this I believe is a way that we can help ourselves regulate how we feel and react to what we perceive. (Morris, 2009, p.179)
Morris cites the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn, in which an experiment using brain monitoring equipment showed that during mindfulness, the left side of the prefrontal cortex, right behind the left eye that is associated with positive emotions showed increased activity; while the right side of the neocortex, right behind the right eye, associated with negative emotions, showed decreased activity. This demonstrates that mindfulness can have an impact on emotional management. (p.184)

2.2.4 Relationships

Because mindfulness practice encourages us to practice empathy and compassion it can have an impact on our relationships and connections to other human beings. Being mindful can help us stop to think about what we are feeling, why, as well as how to react in a more appropriate way that serves us and the people around us. Mindfulness can even help us in unfavorable situations to be able to manage our emotions and not simply be at the mercy of our environment.

Many of the issue within schools, and life in general, come from broken, or weak relationships. With administrators, teachers, students, and parents being a part of the school community, there are lots of opportunities for relationships, both good and bad. Morris (2009) states that from all of his research he has come to the conclusion that mindfulness has the power to aid in repairing these relationships, and consequently elevating the atmosphere and efficacy of schools. To explain the effect mindfulness can have on our interactions with others, Morris tells the story of a soldier who was visiting the supermarket in a hurry and entered the quick 10 items or less checkout line. In this line stood an older woman with a baby, happily chatting with the cashier who was happily interacting with the baby. The soldier could feel himself getting angry, since of course he had entered the line to get in and out quickly, as the 10 items or less checkout has been designed to do. As he began getting angrier, he remembered his mindfulness practice. It reminded him that he is not simply at the mercy of his feelings. He thought about the fact that a few minutes would not change his life. He could tell how much the women were enjoying their encounter. The baby smiled at him and he let go of the angry emotions he felt because he was aware of them and knew that he could simply let go of them. Once it was his time to come to the checkout, as the lady wave’s goodbye to the older woman and the baby, he simply said “what a beautiful baby.” The lady replied that it was her son, and as she could recognize the soldiers
uniform, she mentioned that her husband was also a soldier but had died, and that now she must work hard for her family and that she leaves the baby when he is asleep and returns when he is asleep. She explained that when her mother, the older lady, and her son come visit, it is one of the only times she gets to spend time with him. The soldier who practiced mindfulness was able to see, assess and react to his emotions in a conscious way, and thus rethink a situation that could have been dominated by his anger. (Morris, 2009, p.179) This scenario illustrates how much our perception of events and reaction to these perceptions can affect our relationships, and also how mindfulness can help us maintain healthy, and positive relationships. Related to relationships and forming deep connections, is transcendence.

2.2.5 Transcendence

While Cartwright (2001) says “transcendence of self may be the means by which spiritual development is achieved” (p.216), Kessler (2000) explains that transcendence, while being a spiritual concept, does not always have to be connected to spirituality. (p.118) She states that transcendence is about “reaching beyond ordinary life and consciousness.”(p.115) Kessler also notes that non ordinary states of consciousness, along with athletic, academic and artistic performance, adventure learning, mysterious experiences, as well as suffering or overcoming prejudice or stereotypes as moments when transcendence can be experienced. (p. 118) She adds that mindfulness practices as a way to achieve non ordinary states of consciousness. (p.132) Mindfulness which is proven to induce non ordinary states of consciousness, or transcendent experiences, which help us connect to others. Even before transcendent experiences, mindfulness encourages empathy, compassion and encourages acts of altruism that directly supply interconnectedness and wholeness. Kessler recounts a shocking story of a period of time during which a large high school students at a school she worked at where a large number of students were experimenting with hallucinogenic drugs. When she inquired as to why the students were doing this, many of them replied with answers such as: "I guess I've been thinking of different ways people interpret reality and relate to each other. I've also been thinking about how ingesting certain chemicals can make someone interpret reality in a different way.” This shows a curiosity and yearning to experience transcendent states of mind. We naturally desire to feel a part of something bigger than ourselves. The realization of the interconnected nature of reality, which is the very essence of transcendence, provides an experience that can be deeply moving.
Nurturing this natural curiosity in a safe way, such as through mindfulness practice, could help eliminate the search for transcendence in “destructive” ways. (Kessler, 2000, p.115-116)

Kessler (2000), quotes Mihaly Csikszentmihaly (1996), as describing the experience of transcendence as “there is no space in consciousness for distracting thoughts, irrelevant feelings…self-consciousness disappears, yet one feels stronger than usual. The sense of time is distorted; hours seem to pass by in minute. When a person’s entire being is stretched in the full functioning of the body and mind, whatever ones becomes worth doing for its own sake.” (p.117) This description creates an image of consciousness and awareness that breaks through the individual’s day to day agenda, and reaches to feel interconnectedness with all beings and with everything that exists. It is contended that connectedness may lead to a deeper meaning in life. (Tanyi, 2002) This kind of awareness is what empathy, compassion and true meaning and connections come from. In a 1998 article, Kessler asserted that “the arc of adolescence bends toward connection, students yearn for deep connections to themselves, to others, and to nature or a higher power.”(p. 51-52). Understanding and experiencing transcendence, helps us to see the world and ourselves in a way that gives true meaning to everyday life.

2.2.6 Spirituality

When it comes to meditation, spirituality is often associated. Empathy, compassion and transcendent experiences are considered spiritual, so the association makes perfect sense and is valid. Along with this association often comes questions of religion. These questions of the relationship between meditation, spirituality, and religion prompt the questioning and conversation of what falls within the parameters of the responsibility of education. Spirituality, along with meditation, because of this, are somewhat of controversial subjects in educational practices. Because meditation often gets disregarded for being connected to spirituality, it is important to attempt to define, and destigmatize the concept of spirituality in the context of the classroom. According to Kessler, (2000), the overlooking of spirituality in schools thus far, which tends to include the vast majority institutions in the west, stems from the disagreement of officials in education and politics. Many of the supporters decided not to go forth an pursue spirituality in education at the risk of being labeled “new age,” while many others simply felt that from their
personal perspective on spirituality was close to religion and that educating to nurture spirituality could interfere with previously established religious beliefs. (Kessler, 2000)

Many authors and researchers in the field of education such as Jean-Jacques Rousseau, Friedrich Frobel, Maria Montessori, Rudolf Steiner, among countless others support the idea of spirituality, in some capacity being a fundamental part of humanity, and that it should be nurtured through education. (Mahoudi et al., 2012, p.179) Spirituality is often associated with religion because religion can be a spiritual practice. Spirituality by default however, is not a religious practice and can be practiced completely independently. “Religion is what we do with others, spirituality is what we do with ourselves. (Hill, et al., 2000) In other words, spirituality is a personal practice while religion is institutional.

Because spirituality can be a very vague idea, associated with many different things, with varying interpretations, defining it is important to its legitimacy, in becoming a topic to be discussed in the classroom. (Forbes & Martin, 2003, p.25) Spirituality as a simple definition is difficult to form because it is very subjective, personal experience. Instead, one’s spiritual experience is defined by their own experience with transcendence, connection, wholeness, and compassion. Spirituality is our experience within our “inside world.” According to Jones (2005), “Spirituality in education refers to a transcendence and compassion in the classroom that acknowledges the interconnectedness of the students, the teacher, and the subject.” Morris (2009) sees spirituality as “openness and practicing transcendence.” (p.192) Admittedly, there can be many definitions for spirituality, but generally speaking, the census is that spirituality based on our view of ourselves within the grand scheme of things. The more we practice, the farther our awareness reaches. Mindfulness practice is a direct avenue to experiencing the possibilities of our inner world which reflects out into our other experiences. Wisdom gained through practice such as mindfulness can help us approach learning and knowledge in a way that lasts a lifetime by creating meaning and fulfillment.

2.2.7 Wholeness and happiness

Holistic education which strives to nurture wholeness, views happiness, fulfillment and meaning as goals in the human experience of life to be achieved by recognizing the interconnectedness of us and everything around. Morris (2009) quotes Aristotle who claimed that happiness and
wellbeing come from a “long process of learning how to be fully human” in order to flourish. (p.25) Happiness is a universal experience that we all strive for, so why is happiness not taught in schools? Do we have such differing views on the concept of what makes us happy and thus think that we cannot teach it? Does this difference in concepts have something to do with the externalization of happiness? Do we feel that outside experiences make us happy, instead of happiness stemming from and internal place? This misinterpretation of where happiness comes from could have a lot to do with why we do not bother trying to teach it. This is of course speculation, as there are endless reasons for why we choose not to include certain things in the goals of education. In the age of social media, most of us have seen graphic illustrations adorned with quotes and ideas about happiness, and one that stood out to me was one that stated “Searching for happiness is like searching the world to find your sunshine when they are sitting on your head”, equating to happiness coming from within. It seems to be a general consensus we often push aside to focus on ego driven moments of happiness. Research shows that happiness has much to do with letting go of habits formed in childhood that we cling to, to preserve and serve our fragile egos. (Morris, 2009, p.24) Ego refers to the perception of oneself. Morris describes being dependent on external conditions for happiness as an “unanchored boat, in a harbor, bashing its way around at the mercy of the sea.” (Morris, 2009, p.24) Happiness originating from our world within, can be seen in stories of people who have endured incredible amounts of suffering, yet maintain a positive outlook on life, and experience happiness, without falling into depression and hopelessness despite the unfavorable external conditions. Literature about happiness and wellbeing focuses on state of mind. The state of mind we are in is directly linked to our happiness and wellbeing. (Morris, 2009, p.25) This makes mindfulness a useful tool in teaching happiness. While there is no one universal way to be happy, happiness itself comes from inside, or our “inner world,” thus making it a part of the scope of which holistic education aims to nurture. Essentially, the goal of wholeness is happiness, and happiness is part of our inner world, which is a part of wholeness. This further expresses the need to explore and develop our inner word of emotions and spirituality.
3. Practices & School context

This section will explore meditation and mindfulness practices that can be used in the classroom context as well as examples of schools that have implemented meditation and mindfulness practices within their classrooms.

3.1 Practices

Practices used in school soften include simple activities that help divert the student’s attention to the current moment, helping them practice the skill of focus that with time will become more fluid. The before mentioned practices in section 2.2, or variations of these practices are most commonly used with children. (Hart, 2010) Some of these practices include body scan, mantra, visualization, and mindfulness meditation. (Miller, 2009) (Hart, 2010) Hart (2010), describes an activity where a teacher tells her students to remove their shoes, and allow their feet to press into and spread onto the floor. The pupils are asked to stand up and do simples stretches and breathing exercises such as focus on the way their chest inflates and deflates with each breath. He states that the pupils develop these skills quickly, and happily engage in them. Easy activities such as this one divert the pupils’ attention to the moment, and to what they are doing and feeling. (Hart, 2010)

3.2 Schools applying meditation practice

A simple internet search of schools and meditation will bring endless results for schools that practice meditation and mindfulness in the classroom to help develop the pupils. Hall Meadow Primary school in Northamptonshire, England practices mindfulness meditation in order to reach their aim of educating the whole child. They state on their website that they practice mindfulness to help their students “pay attention in the present moment.” Mention is also made to the fact that as educators we often ask our students to pay attention, however do not specifically help them learn to do so. The school uses a program that is structured in a way that children learn to become aware of their thoughts, responses, and generally themselves in order to manage interactions and challenges. (“Hall Meadow Primary,” 2015)
Lake Windermere School in Salisbury North, Australia serves as another example of a school that uses mindfulness as a tool to help pupils learn lifelong skills. According to an article written about the school’s mindfulness practice, the students have become more able to reflect, and be proactive and thoughtful. It is also mentioned that high school students who have attended this primary school and taken part in mindfulness practice demonstrate a more calm demeanor and ability to deal with challenges and stresses better than pupils who come from other schools. Parents of the students’ note that their levels of happiness and overall wellbeing have been effected by the introduction of mindfulness within their education. (“Lake Windermere,” 2016) (Bell, 2016)

These schools and their implementation of meditation and mindfulness practice, and examples of practices that can be used give us concrete ideas of how meditation and mindfulness can be a practical part of education, especially for schools and educators striving to meet the goals of holistic education.

4. Conclusion

This thesis aims to add to the growing literature exploring the possibilities that meditation can offer us, both generally, as well as in the context of education. Holistic education is discussed to set the scene and demonstrate the importance of a “whole person” approach to education instead of traditional teacher centered education that may concentrate more on just academics. More specifically, the purpose is to bring to light the positive correlation between meditation and mindfulness practice, and affective and social development. As discussed earlier, meditation practice has been scientifically shown to affect our brains in a way that nurtures the development of empathy, compassion, and emotional regulation. These interconnected aspects of affective development directly influence how we perceive ourselves, others, and the world that we live in. The intimately connected nature of affective development and the impacts it has on our social development demonstrate how important it is to be aware of more than simply academic achievement supported by traditional teaching. While some are apprehensive of meditation in schools, perhaps due to the lack of information and stigma surrounding meditation, nonetheless according to Miller (2006), interest around the possible benefits has been growing and continues
to as we search to find the path towards holistic education. (p.50) He cites the studies of Jon Kabat-Zinn (1990) and Erriker & Erriker (2001) as work that imply that meditation can be practiced without reference to a specific religious tradition. Miller also believes that meditation and mindfulness practice can be “applied within an educational institution.” (p.51) Miller cites Gina Levete (1995), who works in the field of meditation in schools; she argues that “meditation could be used in schools if it is presented within a nonreligious framework. (2006, p.51) Francesconi (2010) states that awareness development is “a fundamental pedagogical theme” as well as the primary goal of meditation. This very much implies that meditation practice is something that should be suitable for classrooms. Developing compassion, empathy and spirituality often fall under concepts that get overlooked in the classrooms due to pursuit of high test scores and easily assessable and transferrable skills and knowledge. In the grand scheme of things however, the concepts discussed in this thesis become very important, as we begin looking for meaning and fulfillment in life. Development of our students is the focus of our educational philosophy and the practices we choose to implement in the classroom. Motha (2015) and Burrows (2013) however, remind us that teachers can also benefit from mindfulness meditation, because the practice can help us become more compassionate and respectful, towards ourselves and our students thus helping us facilitate a more genuine holistic learning experience. Based on the examined literature, it can be implied that mindfulness practice supports transformative, affective and social learning. Mindfulness develops empathy, compassion, emotional regulation, spirituality and social relationships. Literature supports both the inclusion of the above mentioned concepts within the classroom, as well as the practice of mindfulness. Literature provides evidence that mindfulness supports the development of the social and affective domains in humans. More research studies need to be conducted to gain a better understanding of the short and long term implications of mindfulness on social and affective learning and development.

References


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