
Research in Brief: Effectiveness of Mindfulness-Based Interventions for Youth in Schools



Mindfulness has been described as “the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience... characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (Bishop et al., 2004). Although there are many definitions of mindfulness, a common theme is that mindfulness is a way of directing attention.

Mindfulness-based interventions have been broadly shown to be effective for a variety of psycho-social problems, and may be effective with youth. There is a broad range of mindfulness-based interventions for youth, and these may range from single-session workshops in the community, to multi-week interventions imbedded in the young persons’ daily life.

Helping students to develop skills in directing their attention has obvious usefulness in learning and classroom management, and many educators are choosing to include mindfulness exercises or practices as part of their classroom routines. A recent systematic review has examined what we know about some of the effects of mindfulness programs in school settings.

What is a Systematic Review?

The purpose of a systematic review is to sum up the best available research on a specific question. This is done by bringing together the results of several studies. Studies included in a review are screened for quality, so that the findings of a large number of studies can be combined.

Why does this matter?

- ⇒ There is growing recognition that social and emotional learning are vital to improve student engagement and academic success.
- ⇒ Mindfulness-based interventions are a popular way to bring social and emotional learning into the classroom.
- ⇒ While the evidence is still limited, mindfulness-based interventions appear to decrease behaviour problems, depression, affective disturbances, and problems with executive functioning and attention, while increasing classroom engagement, emotion regulation, social skills, social-emotional competence, coping, positive affect, optimism, and positive classroom behaviour.



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What Did the Researchers Do?

The researchers conducted a search of electronic bibliographic resources, using the key words “mindfulness” as well as “schools” or “students”. Databases included PsychINFO, ERIC, MEDLINE, and PubMed.

They only included articles that had been published in peer-reviewed journals. The results were further narrowed down to 28 studies that (1) were school based, (2) included students under age 18, (3) where at least one objective dependent variable was obtained from a student, (4) the manuscript focus was on evaluating the effects of an intervention, (5) the target of the intervention was students, and (6) the central component of the intervention targeted mindfulness or identified a mindfulness-based intervention.

A total of 3414 students participated in these studies, with individual projects ranging from 3 to 522 students. Study sizes varied considerably and the 5 smallest studies had an average of 6.4 students, while the 5 largest studies had an average of 339.2 students.

What did they learn?

The intervention outcomes that were studied varied between studies, and no single outcome was measured in more than 6 of the studies. Many studies demonstrated decreased aspects of psychopathology following intervention, including reductions in behavioural problems (n=6), depression (n=4), affective disturbances (n=4), problems with executive functioning and attention (n=4) and suicidal ideation (n=1).

Studies also frequently demonstrated increases in pro-social psychological attributes, although the specific attribute measured varied greatly. These attributes included classroom engagement, emotion regulation, social skills, social-emotional competence, coping, positive affect, optimism, and classroom behaviour.

The researchers believe that mindfulness-based interventions have great potential for improving educational and psychosocial outcomes for students. The existing literature suggests that mindfulness-based interventions are a feasible and acceptable modality of intervention for use in schools.

The researchers also note that further research is needed into mindfulness-based interventions, using better research designs, better descriptions of the characteristics of the students who participated, more complete descriptions of the intervention characteristics, and multi-method, multi-informant outcomes.



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