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Our responsibilities for future generations from a social-emotional learning perspective: revisiting mindfulness

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This article provides the readers with an opportunity to revisit the original purpose of mindfulness and to learn about some concerns and challenges raised in current understandings and practices of mindfulness, in order to make our mindfulness-based practices more effective and relevant, deriving in part from a perspective of social-emotional learning. Over the past several decades, mindfulness has gained increased attention within the clinical and educational settings, especially as intervention practices. The prevalence of mindfulness-based practice use has tripled between 2012 and 2017 among adults; the prevalence among children aged 4 to 17 years increased 9 times from 2012 to 2017, according to a recent national survey in the U.S. Given such a wide and steady rise in attention, our scientific interest in mindfulness has increased dramatically over the past two decades. However, we still have much work to do to translate appropriate knowledge and skills into effective practice.

KEYWORDS

mindfulness, social-emotional learning, responsibility, children and youth, process-focused

Introduction

There has been an increase in the popularity of mindfulness-oriented education and practices, particularly in North America. Mindfulness has been utilized as an intervention program not only in a number of clinical settings, but also in school settings. A recent review shows a notable growth in publications on mindfulness in children and youth between early 2000 and 2019 (Saunders and Kober, 2020). While we acknowledge the popularity, we would like to use this opportunity to revisit the original roots of mindfulness, given some concerns raised in current understandings and practices of mindfulness. Specifically, this paper first presents the original mindfulness. It then reviews how the concept has been informed and practiced in clinical and educational settings, being followed by our critical evaluation of research findings. By reflecting on the original roots of mindfulness and current understanding and practices of mindfulness, finally this paper offers proposed directions on how we can apply mindfulness in relation to the social-emotional learning (SEL) framework, followed by our conclusion. While we provide a constructive evaluation of current mindfulness-based interventions, we would like to remind readers that our intent is not to criticize any of the work that has been done to date. Rather, we aim to offer an opportunity to have a look at mindfulness from a different angle in order to seek for a long-term and sustainable approach, regarding its

effectiveness for our life. We believe that continuing efforts are necessary to better inform educators, parents, and the public about the original purpose of mindfulness and to uncover concerns and challenges. In this way, we hope to provide a more holistic approach to fostering children's and youth's healthy growth.

Original mindfulness

The origins of mindfulness derive from the practice of early Buddhism (e.g., Singla, 2011; Anālayo, 2019), which proposed a perspective on human nature, and the mind and body connection. The word mindfulness itself derives from an English translation of the Pāli word *sati*, which refers to being thoughtful or being aware (Gethin, 2011; Murphy, 2016); however, the term has been most commonly used to refer to attentiveness directed to the present (Nānamoli and Bodhi, 1995). According to the early discourses from the canonical Pāli texts, the purpose of mindfulness is to gain insight into the nature of the self and its existence (Bodhi, 2011). The practice of mindfulness has been defined by Kabat-Zinn (1994) as the process of paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and in a non-judgmental manner. As such, mindfulness is not a state, but rather a gradual transformative process of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors whereby humans attempt to maintain focused attention directed towards developing wholesome qualities of mind (Olendzki, 2011). The key principles of the original purpose of mindfulness are well illustrated in Morita Therapy (MT).

In 1919, MT was developed by Japanese psychotherapist Dr. Shoma Morita as a holistic experiential approach to help re-orient patients in nature (Sugg et al., 2020). According to Morita (1998), nature is used as an all-encompassing term to refer to the reality of all phenomena, both the environment and human nature. MT addresses a particular dilemma that exists in the modern world; humans, being estranged from nature, often seek to challenge, conquer, and control nature, essentially living in opposition to it (e.g., Fujita, 1986; Morton, 2017; Sugg et al., 2020). Accordingly, MT aims to amend this estrangement by helping individuals move from an unnatural state to a natural authentic state where they can live harmoniously with the world and accept the natural reactions of their minds and bodies (Morita, 1998; Kitanishi, 2005). Morita (1998) explains that emotions cannot be controlled and that humans are not considered responsible for their emotions; however, behaviors are controllable, and humans have the responsibility to take action as needed, regardless of the emotions that such actions might evoke (Ogawa, 2007). MT assumes that the efforts that individuals make to change their feelings are at the core of their emotional distress (Hofmann, 2008). As such, MT encourages individuals to free themselves from their emotional constraints, and to focus their efforts on living life as it comes, rather than wasting attention and energy trying to change their emotions (Morita, 1998; Hofmann, 2008).

Similarly, the teachings of Chah (1994), convey the idea of nature as an uncontrollable force that is the way it is. Chah describes the practice of mindfulness as involving a complete awareness of what is happening both internally and externally to one's body; only when the mind is quiet can one understand what it is saying, because the truth cannot be put into words. The Buddhist mindfulness practices are concerned with an embodied awareness of self, emotional balance and the cultivation of clarity, all of which are capacities that can

be developed through the art of intentional attention (Williams and Kabat-Zinn, 2011). However, as recent researchers and psychologists work to develop mindfulness-based training practices, a shift away from its original purpose appears to be taking place.

Current mindfulness

In recent years, mindfulness has rapidly become extremely influential to the general public, businesses, and scientific community, as well as widely practiced in clinical and educational settings. Despite its varied definitions and lack of precise operationalization largely drawn from psychology rather than Buddhist origins (Baer, 2011), Kabat-Zinn's (1994) interpretation continues to be prominent. Despite the inconsistency reported by scholars, contemporary mindfulness has become a tool for well-being and quick relief from distress (Monteiro et al., 2015). Within the clinical setting, Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) have been framed as secular (Brown, 2017) and delivered as widely practiced forms of psychotherapies in the West (Christopher et al., 2009). Among the multitude of MBIs, popular adopted interventions are rooted in daily meditation to reduce stress-related and depressive symptoms among clinical populations (Christopher et al., 2009). Despite the diversity in MBIs and in the way they have been practiced and implemented, they are commonly labelled as "mindfulness-based" approaches (Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011). As shown in several meta-analyses and reviews, MBIs have been used as a means of treating various stress-related problems (e.g., Koncz et al., 2020), psychological and physical disorders (e.g., Cillessen et al., 2019) among various groups. Further, MBIs have been promoted as an effective antidote for reducing psychological distress and regulating behaviors and emotions in non-clinical populations, including children and youth in schools (Keng et al., 2011). While mindfulness programs and interventions have been used as a means to treat a wide range of problems and provide immediate relief, it is essential we recognize that its goal is not to just treat problems, but to help individuals live a fulfilling way of life.

In fact, mindfulness has also received substantial interest among teachers. Based on the work with adults, MBIs and related research in school settings are becoming increasingly popular with children and adolescents. Mindfulness is implemented in different forms of programs in schools (Weare, 2018; Gómez-Olmedo et al., 2020; Mettler et al., 2023). Worldwide, popular mindfulness school-based programs like *Learning to BREATHE* and "*b*" *Mindfulness in School curriculum* offer weekly group sessions in mindfulness, incorporating breathing, meditation, and relaxation exercises, along with SEL (Simpson, 2017; Weare, 2018; Saphiang et al., 2019; Gómez-Olmedo et al., 2020). Incorporating SEL into these programs requires an authentic application that respects its process-focused principles, bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Although how it works remains unclear, the emerging evidence on mindfulness and youth suggests that mindfulness has positive outcomes—it improves students' school adjustment outcomes (Mettler et al., 2023), as well as reduces mental health problems (Dunning et al., 2019; Saphiang et al., 2019; Gómez-Olmedo et al., 2020). As such, and not surprisingly so, mindfulness is considered a promising and cost-effective means to improve the academic and social-emotional well-being of youth in schools (Weare, 2018; Saphiang et al., 2019). Although the literature on mindfulness seems promising,

other recent meta-analyses on school-based mindfulness interventions call attention to the lack of consistent and strong evidence for its effectiveness in improving the academic outcomes and well-being among school-aged children and adolescents (Odgers et al., 2020; Phillips and Mychailyszyn, 2022). As such, despite the pervasive mindfulness hype in contemporary society, the evidence of the efficacy of mindfulness remains weak.

Challenges in the evidence

Mindfulness randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and interventions have methodological issues and limitations, calling into question the reliability and validity of their results (e.g., Creswell, 2017; Hedman-Lagerlöf et al., 2018). What we can learn from mindfulness interventions are in part determined by study quality (e.g., Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011; Zhang et al., 2021). Variation in the way mindfulness is conceptualized, taught and practiced across different program settings, and a lack of standardized training for mindfulness instructors or program implementers makes it difficult to generalize results or ascertain the ideal dosage or intervention approach (e.g., Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011). Scholars in the field are working to address these shortcomings (e.g., Dunning et al., 2019) and should continue to do so to generate reliable evidence. Critiques of empirical studies are noted along with the ways scholars are responding; ongoing problems with MBI evidence are highlighted.

Empirical studies on mindfulness interventions have research design shortcomings, reducing our ability to learn from them. A lack of a control group (e.g., Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011), small sample sizes (e.g., Burke, 2010; Zhang et al., 2021), and recruitment by self-selecting into participation (e.g., Chiesa and Serretti, 2010) are persistent issues. Other studies insufficiently detail the randomization process, control conditions, or research design (e.g., Burke, 2010; Chiesa and Serretti, 2010; Huynh et al., 2019). A meta-analysis by Dunning et al. (2019) focuses exclusively on RCT MBIs, demonstrating advances in the field towards more methodological rigor. However, some shortcomings persist in some cases such as an absence of active control conditions, a lack of detail regarding the randomization process, or omitting to disclose whether participants were blinded to the treatment/control condition (Dunning et al., 2019).

Measurement-related issues can be problematic. Numerous questionnaires and instruments exist, and many are self-report, which can be biased and confusing (e.g., Baer, 2011; Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011; Purser and Milillo, 2015). More recent work shows conflicting terms are used, and there is discord about how to best measure intervention effectiveness (Zhang et al., 2021). Some scholars steer away from quantifying mindfulness and urge the employment of qualitative methodologies such as interviews and observations (e.g., Todd et al., 2015). Mixed methods studies are increasingly used in and are lauded for integrating qualitative methods to contextualize the quantitative results (Huynh et al., 2019). Perhaps the main issue related to measurement is that much of MBI research is less concerned with the overall process of mindfulness and focuses on outcomes and end goals, which is antithetical to mindfulness. As seen in work by Huynh et al. (2019), mixed methods may offer an approach to MBI research that is not purely results-oriented.

The presentation of findings is another way empirical studies present problematic research evidence of MBIs. One review for

psychiatric disorders found that methodological quality moderated the outcome and that studies with methodological issues were related to a larger reported effect size (Hedman-Lagerlöf et al., 2018), underscoring a need for reliable evidence. Similarly, a meta-analysis reports positive albeit small effect sizes across all significant findings and suggests earlier studies may have overestimated their effect (Dunning et al., 2019). Scholars are working to push the field of MBI research forward, but the noted challenges with MBI evidence reflect the misalignment between original and current mindfulness.

Conflicts in the paradigms

The current understanding and practices of mindfulness raise numerous concerns. Mindfulness is often misunderstood as merely a stress-relief technique. Contrary to modern views of mindfulness as a “quick fix” for suffering (Monteiro et al., 2015), its original intent was not a “tool” for treating diseases but a holistic practice, integrated into daily life for an authentic self-experience (Sugg et al., 2020). However, the contemporary application of mindfulness in schools is far from holistic focusing on emotion regulation and behavior management, conforming to a Western psychotherapeutic approach aimed at dealing with stress and dissatisfaction (Monteiro et al., 2015; Simpson, 2017; Weare, 2018). This approach may encourage children the avoidance of discomfort, potentially reinforcing passivity (Monteiro et al., 2015; Simpson, 2017). For instance, studies have found that the behavioral inhibition system (BIS), which relates to the tendency to avoid unwanted experiences, is a potential mechanism that may explain the link between mindfulness and well-being (Sauer et al., 2011a,b). It is worth noting that some MBIs, however, do incorporate prosocial elements like kindness and compassion (Perkins et al., 2022), but the way it has been taught and practiced vary substantially. What is more, scholars have argued that within the Western context, mindfulness’ focus on individualism and the self may exacerbate traits of narcissism and the ego (Singla, 2011; Simpson, 2017), although more research is needed to further understand its potential effects on narcissism and ego inflation. While it is helpful to share strategies to cope with stress, original mindfulness encourages embracing the full spectrum of emotions, fostering interconnectedness and relatedness, rather than self-centeredness and emotional suppression (Morita, 1998; Singla, 2011; Sugg et al., 2020). As such, it is not a mere self-discipline tool to achieve a very limited goal, but rather a way of life focusing on social connections, learning, and human flourishing (Singla, 2011; Sugg et al., 2020). Ultimately, mindfulness is a life-long journey, not just a destination.

Further, under its secular guise, mindfulness has been implemented widely and commercialized for capital gain and interests. For instance, there have been growing concerns about offering mindfulness-based programs to profit-driven organizations wherein their philosophy and values differ from the Buddhist principles and their intention is to sustain corporate oppression and compliance (Monteiro et al., 2015). Stripped of Buddhism ethics, mainstream mindfulness has been refashioned into a “self-help” technique, endorsed by many celebrities, and turned into a capitalist commodity (Doran, 2017; Simpson, 2017). From best-selling books to apps titled “mindfulness,” it has turned into a commercial product that is marketed and consumed by the public with the promise of achieving resilience, productivity, and

happiness (Doran, 2017). Indeed, popular media misinforms the practices of mindfulness and makes exaggerated claims about its benefits (Van Dam et al., 2018). This trend encourages individual responsibility and overlooks the societal conditions that are the root causes of the problems (Doran, 2017). A better appreciation of mindfulness can be achieved by understanding and reflecting on the original roots of mindfulness. We suggest that thinking critically about the emerging role and implications of mindfulness in popular culture is necessary to its integration with SEL. Continuing efforts are needed to promote awareness of the original mindfulness practices and uncover the paradigmatic conflicts with contemporary approach.

Incorporating SEL into mindfulness in education

While the interest and application of mindfulness in education grow along with SEL, the incorporation of SEL into mindfulness-based programs would require more effort to appreciate the ideas and purpose of original mindfulness. SEL is a process whereby individuals develop and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to identify and manage their emotions (i.e., self-awareness and self-management), understand and respect for others (social awareness), set attainable goals, develop and sustain positive relationships (i.e., relationship skills), and make responsible decisions (i.e., responsible decision-making; CASEL, 2020). Of significant importance in CASEL's definition of SEL is the fact that social-emotional learning is a *process*; accordingly, for SEL to be integrated into mindfulness it cannot be taught merely as a technique to fix a problem. As was previously explained, mindfulness is holistic and humanistic mechanism (Morita, 1998; Sugg et al., 2020), whereby humans experience difficult emotions and anxieties, and must learn to accept and embrace these as they come. Accordingly, mindfulness must be cultivated within students for them to have an authentic and natural experience of the self, and the wide range of emotions that they are experiencing.

Self-awareness, one of the key social-emotional competencies, involves embracing the self as a whole. By being aware of our own thoughts, emotions, and values (CASEL, 2020), we can begin to have a deeper understanding of our strengths and limitations. Recognizing all aspects of the self allows for an appreciation of the complexity of the human nature. In mindfulness, this practice can look like accepting the whole self. Incorporated into mindfulness, acceptance of strengths and weaknesses can help foster a compassionate relationship with the self (Perkins et al., 2022). While awareness of present moment has been a core characteristic of when applying SEL in mindfulness practice, it is important to remember that self-awareness is an ongoing process and that compassionate self-reflection is necessary for engaging with the variety of thoughts and emotions that emerge (Sugg et al., 2020). As such, with self-awareness also comes deeper insight into how we cope with life's challenges.

Self-management refers to our ability to effectively manage our thoughts, emotions, and behaviors in different situations (CASEL, 2020). Self-management has often been taught in a limited way in mindfulness focusing on self-regulation (Keng et al., 2011). However, when approached from a mindfulness standpoint informed by SEL, the notion that there is a need to "fix" or "change" one's emotion as a

means to an end is rejected. Rather than the belief that emotions need to be regulated or controlled, from an SEL perspective, we come to understand that emotions are not an obstacle to a fulfilling life. This is in line with Morita therapy which views the full range of emotional experience as integral to our being as they can inform adaptive coping (Morita, 1998; Sugg et al., 2020). Within mindfulness, self-management should not be about changing or suppressing negative emotions but integrating them into our lived experiences while taking constructive action for coping.

Social awareness is another competency of SEL interconnected with self-awareness and self-management. To cultivate social awareness, a foundation of self-awareness and self-management is both necessary. Social awareness involves understanding and respecting the perspectives, feelings, and behaviors of people from diverse backgrounds (CASEL, 2020). Empathy is central to social awareness and mindfulness practice can be leveraged to cultivate empathy for others and respect for their feelings. Both "understanding" and "feeling" the emotions of others allow to appreciate diversity and meaningful interactions with others (Todd et al., 2011; Gueldner and Feuerborn, 2016). Further, social awareness incorporated into mindfulness practice involves respecting the shared human experiences and interconnectedness (Singla, 2011). This can facilitate more harmonious relationships with others, which is the next component of SEL.

Relationship skills refer to our ability to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships, and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups (CASEL, 2020). Within the context of mindfulness, learning to respect one another and the decisions that others make for their own lives is imperative. While many mindfulness-based interventions tend to be inwards focused and emphasize self-improvement, we must remember the original mindfulness encourages fostering interconnectedness and relatedness (e.g., Morita, 1998; Singla, 2011). By incorporating an SEL perspective into mindfulness, it is thus essential to promote the development of healthy relationships, where individuals can feel connected to others and acknowledge when others may need their help or support (CASEL, 2020). Relatedly, the knowledge and information that is gained from developing supportive and trusting relationships with others can be thoughtfully used to make responsible decisions in a variety of contexts.

Responsible decision making is the final SEL competency, and involves the ability to make caring and constructive choices about personal behaviors and social interactions across diverse situations (CASEL, 2020). Individuals will find themselves in a variety of situations, where they will have to make thoughtful decisions by considering and evaluating the impact of their actions. By focusing on mindfulness as a gradual transformative process of thoughts, feelings, and behaviors (Olendzki, 2011), responsible decision making involves careful thought and attention to all aspects of a situation, based on the awareness of how their decisions affect not only themselves, but also others around them (Greenberg, 2014).

In summary, the incorporation of SEL into mindfulness-based programs requires a deep understanding of mindfulness' holistic nature, fostering the core SEL competencies. It is merely enough to teach mindfulness at a surface level as a band-aid for problems; rather, it should be cultivated as an ongoing process towards self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making.

Conclusion

The primary goal of this paper was to provide an opportunity for us, as responsible adults, to deepen our knowledge about mindfulness, evaluate its current applications by addressing some conflicts in the paradigms, and to re-consider how we apply it in our daily lives.

Mindfulness, influenced by Western interpretations like Kabat-Zinn's (1994), has gained widespread popularity across various sectors despite differing definitions, and while MBIs in clinical and educational settings, have shown promise in reducing stress and improving well-being, evidence regarding their effectiveness, especially among youth, remain inconsistent and warrant careful consideration (e.g., Odgers et al., 2020; Phillips and Mychailyszyn, 2022). Further, empirical studies on mindfulness interventions face methodological challenges and measurement-related issues (e.g., Burke, 2010; Chiesa and Malinowski, 2011; Huynh et al., 2019; Zhang et al., 2021), which emphasize the need for more rigorous approaches in research methodologies to accurately assess their effectiveness. While the contemporary understandings and applications of mindfulness often prioritize stress relief over its original holistic purpose (e.g., Monteiro et al., 2015; Simpson, 2017; Weare, 2018), potentially reinforcing passivity and individualistic tendencies, the incorporation of SEL into mindfulness-based programs can allow for a deeper understanding of the origins of mindfulness, through a process whereby students learn to have an authentic and natural experience of the self and the emotions they experience. While awareness of one's emotions is an essential component (i.e., self-awareness) of both SEL and mindfulness, this is a skill that needs to be developed over time and cannot be taught in a few activity-based lessons, as is currently being done in a number of mindfulness-based educational programs (Guedner and Feuerborn, 2016).

Accordingly, it is imperative that there be sufficient teacher training and professional development for educators as well as learning for family members, as we (i.e., teachers and family members) will be the ones responsible for our children's healthy growth. Children should be helped to develop experiential insights into their natural self in the *arugamama* (i.e., "as-is") state as suggested by the original mindfulness, and to come to appreciate their ability to transcend distress and engage in constructive action. Please recall, the original mindfulness was to facilitate active acceptance of one's distress or emotional challenges and their corresponding "desire for life," and to develop a positive attitudinal change and to increase the one's behavioral output and subsequent corrective insights. "Process" is key in mindfulness, requiring time and energy to process feelings, thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors which lead to developing healthy mind. Process could be considered as a cultivating act to work on human development. Mindfulness is more than transmitting

knowledge and skills. Rather, it is a living act, involving value, responsibility, choice, trust, care, and commitment. Facilitators of mindfulness sensitivity are essential to the effective integration of mindfulness into our life. It takes time to become an effective facilitator of mindfulness. However, we believe that it is worthwhile, knowing our life can make a difference for others.

Data availability statement

The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article/supplementary material, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

Author contributions

CK: Conceptualization, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. FC: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. JT: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. KS: Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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