

Contemplative Practice for Beginning Teachers: Should It Be Included in the Teacher Education Curriculum?

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The purpose of this commentary is to consider the role of contemplative practices in the teacher preparation curriculum. Contemplative practices help reduce stress, improve a sense of well-being, and increase coping abilities for professional demands. They can be particularly useful in managing stress in transition situations. We suggest that students preparing to teach be provided specific training on how to use contemplative practices for sustaining positive personal and professional development.

INTRODUCTION

Today, the role of a teacher is much more complex than it was in the past: teachers are responsible for everything from transmitting knowledge to transforming students into future citizens (Vloet, 2009; Vloet & Van, 2010). Teachers need pedagogical and subject matter skills, as well as educational expertise (Beijaard, Meijer, & Verloop, 2004). There is a need for teachers' social and emotional competence in order to foster effective classroom management (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). In addition to that, teachers are subjected to intense tension due to social and cultural changes, such as educational reforms and technological innovation (Hargreaves, 2003; Tateo & Marsico, 2012). For all this, a teacher's role could be stressful (Cameron, Baker, & Lovett, 2006). Indeed, teachers are at risk for burnout (Greenglass, Burke, & Konarski, 1997; Hobfoll, 2001). This situation becomes even more pronounced for teachers at the start of their career, considering the struggles with the demands of their new role (Grudnoff & Tuck, 2003). As explained in Lazarus' classic definition (1966), this stress "arises when individuals perceive that they cannot adequately cope with the demands being made on them or with threats to their well-being." Thus, it is important that early career teachers are equipped with coping strategies and skills to manage stress, especially in transition moments like the passage from the university to a classroom setting. This should lead to a reconsideration of the optimal professional training program for teachers (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1999).

In teacher education, recent research has considered the importance of proposing resilience training (Findlay, 2006; Keltchermans & Ballet, 2002) or mindfulness practices for teaching staff in order to promote teacher well-being (Bush, 2011; Siegel, 2007; Zajonc, 2006). There is also recent interest in the scientific investigation of contemplative practices applied in education and teachers' professional development (Allan, 2000; Austin, 2010; Eaton, Davies, Williams, & MacGregor, 2012; Levinson, Stoll, Kindy, Merry, & Davidson, 2014; Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). The basic idea of such practices is to help individuals become conscious and capable of coping with new difficulties and complex problems.

Considering the limited studies of contemplative practices for teachers (Bernay, 2014), the purpose of this commentary is to address the following for teacher education programs: Should contemplative practice be included in teacher preparation curricula? In this way, we intend to explore the utility and efficacy of introducing contemplative practices in teacher training curricula, with the intention of reducing the stress from transitioning and adapting, especially for early career teachers.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES: FROM DEFINITION TO APPLICATION

Contemplation is generally regarded as an immersion in a deep thinking process, with a focus and awareness "in the moment." It is described as our consciousness at every moment—our thoughts, feelings, sensations, and the surrounding context. In this process, the relationship of listening and the environment becomes important in order to implement a form of embodied learning (Bai, 2001; Gethin, 2011).

Contemplative practice is not a new concept; rather, it has its roots in history through various nations around the world (Jensen, 2013; Repetti, 2010). Different methods for religious contemplative practices were used and are still being used for religious practice (e.g., chanting, prayer, ceremonial performance). These types of practices can be observed in a wide variety of non-religious practices as well (e.g., music, dance, drama, writing poetry or prose, painting, carving, yoga, *qigong*). Contemplation is, in fact, a complex concept with different shades. It includes ancient Buddhist mindfulness meditations, such as Vipassana and Zen meditations; modern group-based standardized meditations, such as mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy; and further psychological interventions, such as dialectical behavioral therapy and acceptance and commitment therapy. Mindfulness, for example, is generally regarded as a form of contemplation, which focuses on the consciousness aspects and involvement in the moment-to-moment experience (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007; Kabat-Zinn, 2005). In a review of the commonalities and differences of these interventions, Chiesa and Malinowski (2011) find that current applied mindfulness-based interventions show large differences in the way mindfulness is conceptualized and

practiced. In their opinion, the decision to consider such practices as unitary or as distinct phenomena will probably influence the direction of future research in this field.

Nevertheless, according to Shapiro, Carlson, Astin, and Freedman (2006), contemplation is based on three fundamental elements: 1) *Intention*, which involves deliberate and purposeful regulation of one's concentration for thinking; 2) *Attention*, the ability to maintain attention in the present moment without interpretation or evaluation; 3) *Attitude*, a mental state brought to mindfulness; and 4) *Contemplation*, honesty, approved, or non-approved phenomenon.

The benefits of contemplative practice have been discussed in several research studies (Schonert-Reichl & Stewart Lawlor, 2010), with significant new possibilities for enhancing the well-being of an individual through contemplative practice, according to Brown and Ryan (2003). Contemplation practices reduce stress and fear, and also cultivate more wellness, balance, and serenity in human life. It is helpful in developing and transforming thinking with deeper concentration, with a deeper examination of meaning, purpose, and values. It helps in developing greater understanding and communication skills, and at the same time, it improves focused attention, creativity, and positivity.

One widely implemented model of a meditation-based approach is mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR), an 8-week program that incorporates both mindfulness and compassion-based elements. Training enhances the neural circuits that underlie empathy in adults (Siegel, 2010; Singer & Lamm, 2009) for enduring cognitive, emotional, and neuroplastic change (Lutz, Slagter, Dunne, & Davidson, 2008). This awareness of the transitory nature of each event helps reduce anxiety and leads to an even greater openness to new ideas. As noted by Davis, Sumara, and Luce-Kapler (2000), mindfulness builds attention, focus, and the ability to notice, which collectively enhance learning potentialities. To measure mindfulness, two instruments in particular have been used. One is the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (MAAS) developed by Brown and Ryan (2003), which is designed to analyze self-awareness as a determiner of self-regulated behaviour and positivity. The second is the Mindfulness Scale, constructed by Bodner and Langer (2001), to measure flexibility, engagement, and novelty seeking and production.

Keeping in mind the evidence for the utility of contemplative practice, academic disciplines have begun in recent years to incorporate contemplative practices into education, which we will explore below.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES IN THE CLASSROOM

Contemplative practices can create a positive learning environment, improving teaching and learning. Although the literature on contemplative practice in the classroom is limited, this provides insight into the issues of a more holistic view of classroom practice (Miller, 1994). Use of contemplative activities during teaching and learning is helpful for generating new knowledge and proposing new investigations.

From the student perspective, contemplative practices are helpful in cultivating qualities like focused attention, which enhances the ability to successfully perform assigned tasks (Mackler, Aguila, & Serena, 2008), deepens understanding of texts, and enhances inquiry and insight (Bush, 2013). In this way, it is possible to enhance attention, increase creativity, improve listening, and strengthen critical thinking and engagement with course content (Jensen, 2013). Shapiro, Brown, and Astin (2011) posit that using contemplative practice is conducive for reducing stress for better academic achievement. In fact, to get the most out of teaching and learning, it is essential that the teachers' and students' minds should be peaceful, strong, and focused. Contemplative approaches are thus beneficial for students because they encourage a reflective and intentional interaction between the individual and their environment (Arthurson, 2015). In Italy, Fabbro and Muratori (2012) have conducted studies using meditation with children. Crescentini, Capurso, Furlan, and Fabbro worked with a group of second grade children to test the effects of mindfulness training for eight weeks. The research dealt with issues related to self-awareness, the role of the teacher, and relationships in a learning environment.

Teachers can incorporate contemplative practices in their teaching in order to enhance the quality of their classroom environments (Jensen, 2013). The daily application of these practices with students in schools as well as in their personal lives can bring noticeable changes (Kyle, 2010). Ritchhart and Perkins (2000) proposed using mindfulness not only for a specific lesson, but throughout the entire day. It transforms the teacher's capability of paying close attention to his or her surroundings, even in the often hurried, disordered environments of classrooms (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996). However, the application is still related to the personal initiative of individual teachers rather than as a departmental or institutional strategy, as shown in studies conducted by Crane, Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell, and Williams (2010) in the U.K. and Duerr, Zajonc, and Dana (2003) in North America.

For a more institutional prospective, Briner & Dewberry (2007) studied the links between staff well-being and school performance, considering the fact that staff well-being is a key factor of school success. There are also international institutes dedicated to promotion of contemplative practices in education, such as the Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education, which promotes the emergence of a broad culture of contemplation in the academy and into contemporary life.

Below, we focus on contemplative practices for promoting professional development for teachers (Hart, 2001; Langer, 1998). In particular, we consider these practices useful to reduce stress for pre-service and early career teachers transitioning between university and classroom (Kostanski, 2007; Schonert-Reichl & Stewart Lawlor, 2010).

CONTEMPLATION FOR TEACHER PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

It is essential that teachers are supported with useful skills in managing difficulties and transition. Teacher training institutions should consider introducing a specific and tailored training course on contemplative practices to reduce stress and acquire the right mindset to manage difficult situations (Flores & Day, 2006). In research studies by Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, and Davidson (2013); Kostanski (2007); and Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, and Karayolas (2008), pre-service and in-service teachers showed reduced levels of stress after taking a course in mindfulness.

In this way, the teacher can use contemplative practices to promote personal well-being, improve upon teaching practices, and deal with classroom pressures (Schoeberlein, 2009). Contemplative practices can cultivate an inner “technology of knowing” (Hart, 2004). Below we discuss some models proposed for teachers to apply contemplative practices.

CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICES IN ACTION

Shapiro, Brown, and Astin (2011) have recommended the following methods for promoting contemplative practice in teacher education: conducting research that is based on some theory; enhancing consistency in research practice; expanding the scope for disseminating the results of contemplative research; considering the mechanism of contemplative practice for positive effects; and discovering the best practices for contemplation. Korthagen and Vasalos (2009) proposed the “onion model,” which describes possible contents of reflection at six different levels, including the environment, behavior, competencies, beliefs, professional identity, and mission.

Crane et al. (2010) set out criteria for mindfulness in teacher preparation and competence: 1) foundational training (engagement in a mindfulness-based learning program from a personal perspective), 2) basic teacher training (putting the basic building blocks in place with supervisors), 3) advanced training (continued engagement with good practice), and 4) continuing professional development (ongoing commitment).

Technology can also help improve the reflection and application of contemplative skills, using special technological environments like webinars (e.g., Center for Contemplative Mind in Society/ACMHE) or social networks for peer-to-peer sharing of practices and skills. The role of these networks is to support new practices that have the potential for professional development (Pachler, Seipold, & Bachmair, 2012; Siemens & Weller, 2011).

CONCLUSION

We have shown that contemplative practice in teacher education is an expanding topic. We have reported studies about how contemplative practices are potentially helpful in teacher professional development, especially to reduce stress and promote well-being. Combining contemplative with reflective practice in a scaffolded teacher preparation curriculum can provide pre-service teachers and early career teachers with support through positive and effective professional development. Teachers should be equipped with transversal and soft skills to face professional challenges in the short and long term. In this way, contemplative practice can be a holistic approach to professional development, protecting against stress and supporting personal well-being.

Finally, it is significant to consider how to introduce contemplative practices in the teacher training curriculum and how to deal with teachers who have interest in these activities (Arthurson, 2015; Joyce, ETTY-Leal, Zazryn, & Hamilton, 2010). We recommend introducing contemplative practices through the following:

- Introduce the topic using a theoretical path to understand the validity and usefulness of these practices;
- Free up the teacher and the student to participate in these activities;
- Manage and accept any resistance by the teacher and the students;
- Propose examples of applications for students in the classroom for their personal development;
- Encourage participation in online groups and networks to support the implementation of the practice in teaching and personal routine.

In conclusion, we consider these practices useful to bring added value to the training of future teachers. Implementation is, however, hampered by the lack of current understanding of contemplative practices in standard teacher training institutions, where such practices are often viewed as “weak” techniques and approaches. To address this, it will be useful to design activities and paths with contemplative practices in a flexible way, allowing pre-service teachers to consider these practices as potentially useful tools for personal and professional growth.

Notes

1. Center for Contemplative Mind in Society/ACMHE (<http://www.contemplativemind.org/>).

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Cite This Article as: *Teachers College Record*, Date Published: December 11, 2015
<http://www.tcrecord.org> ID Number: 18833, Date Accessed: 2/9/2016 5:19:56 PM

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