



Mindfulness meditation for future early childhood teachers in Japan



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The high turnover of early childhood teachers is a concern in Japan and USA.
- Early childhood students may benefit from learning mindfulness meditation.
- A guided compassion meditation and a sitting meditation were piloted with students.
- Both meditations lowered stress, and the compassion meditation seems preferred.

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ABSTRACT

To prevent future burnout and turnover among early childhood education students, mindfulness training may hold promise as a measure. A lab-based pilot and classroom-based feasibility study was designed to investigate an effective way to introduce mindfulness meditation. Results suggested that two types of audio-guided mindfulness meditation, a sitting meditation and a compassion meditation reduced stress level, and that the compassion meditation was perceived as more comfortable than the sitting meditation. As a tentative conclusion, the compassion meditation may be introduced first before the sitting meditation. Additional studies should examine the effects of longer-term meditation practice on teaching career development.

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1. Introduction

Stress-related issues have been cited as reasons for the high turnover of early childhood teachers in Japan and U.S.A. Mindfulness meditation may hold promise as a preventive measure towards burnout and turnover among future early childhood education teachers. Here, we sought to develop a study design and protocol, and conduct a lab-based pilot and classroom-based feasibility study to investigate how useful and effective pre-recorded meditation guides would be for novice meditators. The results of this study inform teacher educators who are considering

introducing mindfulness training to future teachers as to the logistics of implementation, and researchers who are going to examine longer-term effects of mindfulness meditation among future teachers in the college classroom.

A shortage of early childhood teachers and a high turnover have been stirring serious national concerns in Japan. Despite the decreased number of children in recent years, approximately 83,000 young children are currently waiting to get into kindergartens or nursery schools (The Japan Times, 2016). The teacher shortage derives from the small number of qualified teachers who enter the profession and from the high turnover of novice teachers once they start working. According to a survey conducted by Kato and Suzuki (2011), 67 of 132 surveyed kindergartens and nursery schools reported that novice teachers retired within three years, and the top four rankings of reasons for early retirement indicated

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stress-related and stress-causing issues, such as self-perceived lack of aptitude, working conditions, interpersonal conflict, and health issues in that order. As a reason for early retirement within a year, one respondent of another survey mentioned the fact that she was assigned to “teach multiple children with disabilities despite being in her first year” (Mori, Hayashi, & Higashimura, 2013). A lack of disability training may compound stress levels.

A high turnover rate of early childhood teachers has also been a great concern in U.S.A. (Cassidy, Lower, Kintner-Duffy, Hegde, & Shim, 2011). Similar to the findings from the survey in Japan, stress-related issues emerged prominently in the survey which Paquette and Rieg (2016) administered to early childhood and special education pre-service teachers during their teaching placement. Their perceived stressors included excessive workload and time management, classroom management and discipline, and communication with other teachers and university supervisors. Because some survey respondents reported yoga and deep breathing as a mean for relieving stress, Paquette and Rieg (2016) suggested incorporating meditation, yoga, and mindfulness into the teaching curriculum.

Standard meditation courses have been offered to school teachers who reported benefits, including reduced anxiety (Anderson, Levinson, Barker, & Kiewra, 1999; Gold et al., 2010; Kemeny et al., 2012), burnout (Anderson et al., 1999; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013), stress level (Anderson et al., 1999; Beshai, McAlpine, Weare, & Kuyken, 2015; Flook et al., 2013), depression (Gold et al., 2010; Kemeny et al., 2012), increased mindfulness skills (Gold et al., 2010; Kemeny et al., 2012) and well-being (Beshai et al., 2015). However, a dearth of research has explored the feasibility of mindfulness meditation training in future teachers. To date Hao's (2016) study is probably the only research that has incorporated regular sitting meditation into a teacher education course. Although this study demonstrated the usefulness of meditation for reflective teaching practice, nearly 40% of the pre-service teachers had had prior experience of meditation before the course and the study did not investigate suitable ways to introduce mindfulness meditation to novice meditators. Before considering full standard meditation training, we wanted to try out one mindfulness meditation session, and to evaluate the feasibility and immediate effects on students in an early childhood teacher training program.

1.1. Sustaining the attention of novice mindfulness meditators by loving kindness instructions

Japan has a tradition of Zen meditation which has profoundly influenced all walks of life, ranging from Buddhist monks' formal meditation training to the secular tea ceremony and a sport form of Japanese fencing called Kendo (Ellington, 2009). One of the characteristics of the tradition is the challenging entry processes, epitomized in the famous story of the test of refusal to screen applicant monks. Upon their arrival at a Zen temple gate, the applicants are rejected and advised to go home. Despite this rejection, they must demonstrate their strong desire and deep commitment to learning before they are allowed to enter the temple and start training (D. Suzuki, 2010).

In contrast to the traditional Zen meditation with the challenging entry processes, mindfulness has been recently introduced to Japan (Otani, 2014) as a non-religious method (Kabat-Zinn, 1994) which positively influences health, well-being and happiness (Kabat-Zinn, 2011). Instructions on how to practice mindfulness are now widely available through pre-recorded audio guidance on the internet and commercial CDs. The pre-recorded audio guidance is convenient and non-threatening for beginners who want to have a taste of mindfulness.

The standard mindfulness training programs in the recordings typically start with the raisin exercise, body scan, and sitting meditation (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 2005; Williams & Penman, 2011), but these exercises are not necessarily interesting and rewarding for all beginners. Brewer, Davis, and Goldstein (2013) acknowledge the difficulty that novice meditators often have in paying attention to the breath, for example, because this action often elicits no immediate reward for the novice. A proportion of beginners may give up mindfulness training at this point and not return, missing the rest of the learning and development opportunities. Because a successful entry experience can determine whether or not the novice continues, it is worth considering an alternative exercise, such as guided loving kindness (*metta*) or compassion meditation which induces a good and rewarding feeling of selfless generosity (Brewer et al., 2013).

Compassion, particularly as extended to non-relatives, seems to be a common human attribute (Darwin, 1871/2004; Sober, 2002; Tomasello, Melis, Tennie, Wyman, & Herrmann, 2012). If compassion is a component of human nature and appealing to novice meditators, then an exercise to develop compassion could stimulate the curiosity, interest, and pleasure of novice meditators, thereby facilitating a reward-based learning experience. His Holiness the 14th Dalai Lama of Tibet states that “compassion is essential in the initial stage, in the intermediate stage, and in the final stage of spiritual development” (Gyatso, 2003). One such method of compassion training is compassion meditation, otherwise termed loving kindness (*metta*) meditation (Stahl & Goldstein, 2010) or befriending (Williams & Penman, 2011) meditation, which typically starts with an instruction to be kind to yourself and love yourself and with a wish that you are free from suffering and in peace (i.e., self-compassion), then to extend compassion to close, neutral, and distant people, including enemies, and ultimately all sentient beings in the universe. In our studies, compassion meditation is contrasted with sitting meditation (Kabat-Zinn, 2005) in which one focuses on breathing, physical sensations, sounds, thoughts and feelings. Kabat-Zinn (1990) reports positive responses of novice participants who experience loving-kindness meditation in an afternoon session in an all-day workshop. With this in mind, it is of interest to understand how novice meditators experience the two types of meditation, namely sitting meditation and compassion meditation. It is also of interest to determine how useful and effective pre-recorded compassion meditation guides are as compared to pre-recorded sitting meditation guides on stress response, empathy, compassion, and prosocial behavior for novice meditators. To make the comparison between the two types of mindfulness meditation legitimate, all factors other than the content of audio guides need to be kept as similar as possible. Therefore the voice and the duration of the audio guides are carefully constructed as explained in 2.1.2 Intervention section.

2. A lab-based pilot study

Before exposing those students who are being trained as early childhood educators to the two types of mindfulness meditation, we first had to ensure that the behavioral protocol of recruitment and experimental procedures works in practice. Therefore, we piloted two key aspects of the study: the feasibility and acceptability of two types of guided meditation and the outcome measures.

2.1. Methodology

2.1.1. Pilot study design and analysis

This pilot study was designed as a quasi-experimental two-group trial study with repeated measures. Feasibility and outcomes

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