

Effects of a School-Based Mindfulness Intervention on Stress and Emotions on Students Enrolled in an Independent School

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Abstract : Students enrolled in high-achieving schools are under tremendous pressure to perform at high levels inside and outside the classroom. Achievement pressure is a prevalent source of stress for students enrolled in high-achieving schools, and female students in particular experience a higher frequency and higher levels of stress compared to their male peers. The practice of mindfulness in a school setting is one tool that has been linked to improved self-regulation of emotions, increased positive emotions, and stress reduction. A mixed methods randomized pretest-posttest no-treatment control trial, evaluated the effects of a six-session mindfulness intervention taught during a regularly scheduled life skills period in an independent day school, one type of high-achieving school. Twenty-nine students in Grades 10 and 11 were randomized by class where Grade 11 students were in the intervention group ($n = 14$) and Grade 10 students were in the control group ($n = 15$). Findings from the study produced mixed results. There was no evidence that the mindfulness program reduced participants' stress levels and negative emotions. In fact, contrary to what was expected, students enrolled in the intervention group experienced higher levels of stress and increased negative emotions at posttreatment when compared to pretreatment. Neither the within-group nor the between-groups changes in stress level were statistically significant, $p > .05$, and the between-groups effect size was small, $d = .2$. The study found evidence that the mindfulness program may have had a positive impact on students' ability to regulate their emotions. The within-group comparison and the between-groups comparison at posttreatment found that students in the mindfulness course experienced statistically significant improvement in the in their ability to regulate their emotions at posttreatment, $p = .009 < .05$ and $p = .034 < .05$, respectively. The between-groups effect size was medium, $d = .7$, suggesting that the positive differences in emotion regulation difficulties were substantial and have practical implications. The analysis of gender differences as they relate to stress and emotions revealed that female students perceive higher levels of stress and report experiencing stress more often than males. There were no gender differences when analyzing sources of stress experienced by the student participants. Both females and males experience regular achievement pressures related to their school performance and worry about their future, college acceptance, grades, and parental expectations. Females reported an increased awareness of their stress and actively engaged in practicing mindfulness to manage their stress. Students in the treatment group expressed that the practice of mindfulness resulted in feelings of relaxation and calmness.

Keywords : achievement pressure, adolescents, emotion regulation, emotions, high-achieving schools, independent schools, mindfulness, negative affect, positive affect, stress

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