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Implementing Mindfulness into Schools

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Mindfulness in Schools
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Mindfulness Seminars in Schools

Learning for Life Charter School located in Marina, CA. serves students in grades 7-12. The student at Learning for Life had challenges in traditional school settings and deals with a variety of social, emotional and academic challenges. Mindfulness seminars were implemented to help provide a toolkit to manage these challenges. The project with help from the guidance counselor and school director was a series of mindfulness seminars. Mental Health and well being are not discussed enough in our school system and children at a young age need to know that their emotions are validated and they have methods to work through how they are feeling. This project's main focus was on emphasizing the idea that emotions are a normal thing and there is a healthy way to express them within themselves and to others. Mindfulness focuses on the present and really appreciating a moment-by-moment experience. Results of this project were successful because the students took at least one aspect of mindfulness and incorporated them into their lives or shared their findings with others.

Keywords: Mindfulness Seminars, socio-emotional, academic challenges

Agency and Communities Served

Learning for Life Charter School (LFLCS) is a charter school located in Marina, CA., that provides a different learning environment for students who have been expelled from traditional schools or were at risk of getting expelled. This agency's mission is built on the hope that they are able to "enable students in grades 7-12 who had dropped out or were at risk of dropping out of traditional schools to become motivated again to learn, to desire to complete their education, and to earn a High School Diploma" (Learning for Life Charter School, 2018). These principles and mission that the school follows are what drives the success of their organization. Enrollment in the school is almost at capacity and more and more students and parents are choosing this school as their path for education.

Along with providing an ulterior method of attaining a High School Education, Learning for Life Charter School provides services to those families who need assistance. LFLCS has resources on site that can assist families with medical care, affordable housing, and access to food boxes (by request students can ask for a food box which is assembled with food, courtesy of the Food Bank); these resources are available through the director of the school or the social worker on staff. Most of the students that attend LFLCS are low-income families, roughly 51%, and because of this statistic, the organization tries to do all they can to help out their students (Great Schools, 2016). The school is diverse when it comes to the ethnicity served as well, but the majority of the population of students consists of those who are Hispanic (61%) (Great Schools, 2016).

Problem

Mental health is not a subject that is talked about, sometimes at all, in the public school system. It seems more beneficial for students to be taught how to deal with their emotions in a healthy way and understand that talking about them is “normal”, at a young age. With students having this thought process so young, their lives and mindset for most of their lives will be one that reflects positivity and mental self-care. Mindfulness is just one approach to bettering the mental health of this generation and generations to come, with activities and normalizing the talk of one’s emotions. Mindfulness hopes to achieve the mindset of focusing and worrying only about the present and stresses acceptance as one of the main successes of this idea. Once one achieves the idea of acceptance, their perspective on life completely changes and the end result hopes for the one using mindfulness to be content with their life. Along with mindfulness, there are plenty of other approaches that help with mental health in schools.

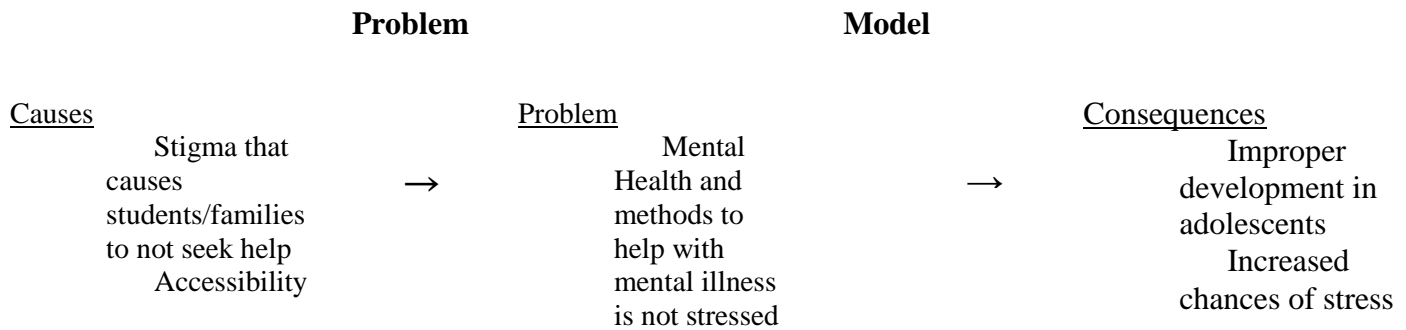
Accessibility is one of the reasons why students don’t know about mindfulness or mental health. Resources are provided at the school and counselors and school psychiatrists are available on school campuses; however, these all require the student to go and seek help. This ties in with the unfortunate fact that mental health issues have stigmas attached to the people that are diagnosed with them. The stigma that is attached to this has two components: social and self-stigma. Self-stigma “is the prejudice which people with mental illness turn against themselves” whereas public stigma “is the reaction that the general public has to people with mental illness” (Corrigan and Watson, 2002, para. 2). Stigmas are made up of 3 smaller categories that are: stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination (Corrigan and Watson, 2002, para. 2). People can be knowledgeable about a stereotype, but not necessarily agree with it. If a person is knowledgeable

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of a stereotype and chooses to be an advocate for it, are those who are prejudice (Corrigan and Watson, 2002). At the minimum level, someone who is prejudice will command the idea; at the most radical level, someone who is prejudice will display hostile behavior and/or commit violent acts against the group that they are being prejudiced to (Corrigan and Watson, 2002). These prejudices are what deter people from seeking help with their traumas or mental health.

The consequences of children not understanding that mental health is a serious issue, and should be discussed, are detrimental to the students and their development. It has been found that adolescents that experienced trauma or did not develop correctly socio-emotionally, have higher a higher risk of physical disease and psychosocial dysfunction (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford et. al., 2017). Some causes of trauma in adolescents include emotional abuse, neglect, sexual abuse, physical abuse, etc. These occurrences in a child's life in the early stages of development can interrupt the development of cognition, self-concept, regulation, and a few other developmental disruptions (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford et. al., 2017). Specifically, "toddlers or preschool-aged children with complex trauma histories are at risk for failing to develop brain capacities necessary for modulating emotions in response to stress" (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford et. al., 2017, para. 9). The response to situations that are presented to adolescents with or without trauma is what differentiates the two. "Non Traumatized young children gradually gradually learn to orient to both the external and internal environment, rather than responding reflexively to whatever stimulus presents itself through a gradual shift from right hemisphere dominance (feeling and sensing) to primary reliance on the left hemisphere (language, abstract reasoning, and long-range planning) (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford et. al., 2017, para. 9). Certain traumas also cause the adolescent to have an increased susceptibility to stress or focusing, and an inability to regulate emotions (Cook, Spinazzola, Ford et. al., 2017).

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Project Description and Justification

The project taking place at Learning for Life Charter School titled *Mindfulness Seminar* focuses on helping students harbor and understand their emotions, and promotes acceptance of situations that have happened in one's life. A large amount of the population of students that attend LFLCS have experienced trauma or have socio-emotional issues that have led them to this school, therefore making this seminar one that will benefit these students. Building a relationship with these students over the past three semesters has helped me hone in on special circumstances in their lives and what I can do to help them overcome any obstacles they may face. This seminar is what was found to fit most of the student's needs and promote their personal growth. This *Mindfulness Seminar*, as mentioned previously in this essay, is an outlet that the students can use to gain different methods to help them and their mental health. It is a way for children, to learn at an early age, to focus on the present and understand that they have no control over the past and cannot predict the future. This seminar advocates for students to focus on the present, and on anything they can control that will make them successful. This seminar is being carried out on a weekly (once a week) basis for an hour, for students who choose to participate in this seminar. Each week, the seminar will focus on different aspects of mindfulness (i.e. exercises for meditation, methods to focus on the present, acceptance), and will consist of the main idea and

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an exercise to go along with it. Once the project is completed, students who participated in three of the eight seminars will be given a survey with questions asking how, if at all, the seminars have helped them.

With this being a volunteer based project, there are many obstacles that may occur. Attendance is the number one obstacle that has been brought to my attention. Students are not consistent with attendance at the school, let alone these seminars; so the number of students and who shows up will be different each session. Another obstacle is participation while the seminars are being carried out. During the seminars, the student's feedback and opinions are a major factor that plays into the success of this project. Because most of the students have experienced trauma, their willingness to discuss their emotions or what they are going through is very minimal. One of the obstacles as an instructor of this seminar that I am going to have to accept is that there may not always be participation or large numbers who attend this seminar due to their traumas, and understand that I cannot force the students to “open wounds” they are not ready to.

Project Results

The outcome that is hoped to be achieved by the end of this seminar, is to allow the students to harbor, accept, and express their emotions in a healthy way. This, of course, I don't expect to be done overnight, but I hope that this is the first step in the journey to that outcome. These students who have experienced trauma, most often repress their emotions and as a result of this turn to violence or anger as their outlet. Another goal of mine is to get students to realize that taking a step back from a situation and evaluating it, instead of immediately reacting, is what is most constructive in times of anger or stress. Lastly, I hope that the agency continues to carry out these seminars after my time is done at this site. These seminars are a way to help students at a young age express themselves in a safe space; something that is not always offered to everyone.

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As the project came to a close, it was duly noted that one of the expected outcomes was a success. Students in the seminar opened up to the instructor and their peers within the first couple of sessions and really started to appreciate these meetings by the third session. Four of the students who attend Learning for Life Charter School came to all the sessions that took place, so in the fourth session of the 8-week seminar, I asked those students to express to others what they think mindfulness is and how it has contributed positively to their life. One of the girls expressed that it was a “form of therapy” for them and another one explained that the activities made her “feel more at peace” with herself. This feedback along with the consistent attendance of a handful of students, this proves that the seminars had a positive influence on the students and their thought process. Many of the students go up to me during the week asking if a session is being held that day, showing that they look forward to the classes and they have an interest in its curriculum.

This project had so many successes due to so many different factors. One of the strengths that helped the project be as successful as it was, was the duration of time that was allowed for the students to build a stronger relationship with the instructor of the class. The children that attend this charter school are those that have experienced some type of trauma and need somebody in their lives that is consistent and shows compassion towards their feelings. This project gave these students the opportunity to have that type of person in their life; the sessions were always kept in confidence as well as whatever the students decided to confide in the instructor unless it was a threat to the students well being or other students. This allowed the students to express their emotions and allowed them to develop the tools to continue to do this even after the project was finished.

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Another strength has to be the promotion through the social worker at Learning for Life Charter School, Sergio Paredes. Mr. Paredes constantly was recruiting students and informing them about the sessions that took place. Every Wednesday, the days that the seminars were held, Mr. Paredes would go up to those children who he believed would benefit most from mindfulness and ask them to go and join in. Sergio also provided the project with all the food and beverages that were used during the sessions.

Along with strengths and successes, this project also had its deal of challenges. One of these challenges includes the fact that the class was very lax in the sense that attendance was voluntary. If attendance was required of the students, the seminar would have been more beneficial because the students would have been attending consistently and getting all aspects of the class. Another challenge was lack of communication with the director of the school and the priority of the project. The first two sessions of the class were canceled because there was miscommunication with the times the conference room could be used and who had priority. The issue was easily fixed after the first two sessions but it did delay the project by two weeks at the beginning of the school year.

Conclusion & Recommendations

With the interest of the students and based on the results of the project it is believed that the continuation of this project would be the best for the students and their mental health. The results were extremely successful in the sense that the students who did attend the sessions really benefited from them and looked forward to them as a part of their weekly routine. The counselor is trained the most on this topic so he would be the best candidate to fill as the instructor of this project. Along with the counselor, Mr. Paredes would be the next best candidate to fill the title as the instructor of this seminar. He has built the best relationship with a majority of the students

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and has a very welcoming and patient personality. Lastly, if there is another intern at Learning for Life who is interested in this topic, they could continue the idea of the project and change it to their liking. A lesson plan and basic guidelines of how the course should be run were written out and sent to the director and guidance counselor, so some of the tools are already provided to the school if they choose to continue these seminars. One suggestion that would benefit the seminar and its goals is to get a bigger working space for the classes and make at least some of the sessions mandatory for all students so they get a chance to experience what the seminars are about.

Personal Reflection

As instructor and creator of this project, I was able to experience hands-on how much the students at this school really would benefit from having this type of program in their school. This project was implemented with the idea that it would help students regulate their emotions and express them in a healthy way to themselves and to others. The goal of this project ties in with the social issue of mental health. As mentioned previously in this essay, mental health is a topic that is not normally discussed in the school system and in society in general. Just recently has it been accepted in society that mental health is something that is just as important as physical health and should be stressed just as much. This seminar allows students to be introduced to that and looking at the results, it is clear that children at a young age aren't even aware that they need this type of program in their life. Once they sat through a class and experienced what mindfulness was in a very general sense most of the students enjoyed what it was all about and embraced its teachings. Seeing hands-on how groundbreaking a lot of these activities were for the students allowed for evidence that these activities are beneficial in more ways than none.

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The general social problem that this project covered was the idea of communication and expressing oneself. Children at times are taught to act a certain way or to only say things at certain times and not fully express themselves at all times. Repressing emotions and feelings at such a young age is conditioning children to do that for the rest of their lives, which in most cases is the root of behavioral issues. Addressing these issues in a relatable way with the children through activities that are masked as mindfulness activities is a start to implementing these ideas into their lives.

There are multiple ways that mental health can be discussed in schools other than mindfulness seminars. Overall, schools being more aware of the subject matter and finding ways to minimize the factors that are contributing to a negative school environment are the very basic ways the mental health can be addressed. Creating a safe space for children is the first step that can be made by schools, to introduce to students that mental health is just as important as their physical health. Safe spaces are designed to “support social-emotional learning by helping kids pay attention to their feelings and learning how to manage them” (Kiedaisch, 2018, para. 3). Teachers that have participated in creating safe spaces in the classroom say that they include headphones, glitter jars, books, and other items that are used to help the student “decompress” (Kiedaisch, 2018, para. 4). Creating these safe places conveys the message that mental health and well being is just as important as any other aspect of health, and it allows the children to be comfortable in their learning environment; therefore improving the chances of the learning experience to be more beneficial to the child.

Allowing teachers to be trained, in the most general form, on how to help students if they come to them with any issues is another way that addressing mental health can be normalized in the school setting. A simple training on how to spot students who are mentally ill would suffice,

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and from there have the teachers direct the students to personal that have a higher training and education on the subject. This act of taking time to train those staff who associate themselves with the students the most also allows for the student to be more likely to reach out for help; building rapport with students is a major factor in the success of helping those with their mental health.

As far as for future interns at Learning for Life Charter School, my advice to them is to keep an open mind and go into the agency having a “zero judgment” mentality. As an intern, you go into the school knowing that it is not a traditional school setting and the students have experienced trauma and/or have behavioral issues. Knowing this, one must keep in mind that every day will not be like the one before. Children who have experienced trauma, for the most part, acquire behavioral issues due to the trauma they have experienced. Certain words or actions may work as a trigger for some of the students and put them in a place where they are reliving that trauma. Being calm and not reacting in a way that is putting down the student to make them feel like what they are feeling is invalid, is another really important aspect to remember when at this agency. And lastly, there needs to be an effort made by the intern in order to build a relationship with them. In order for the capstone project to be successful, rapport is a major factor in making it possible. Without rapport, the students will not have any level of trust towards the intern, making it hard for them to relate or want to participate in the project. With a level of trust, the students also build a level of respect for that intern. When they have a level of trust and respect, these students use these people in their lives as role models or outlets to help them live a better lifestyle. Interning at Learning for Life Charter School has allowed me to have field experience and shown me that I made a right decision on picking Collaborative Health and Human Services as my major.

Appendices

Appendix A

Scope of Work

| Activities | Deliverables | Timeline/Deadline |
|--|--|-----------------------------------|
| Promotion of Project | Flyers | Throughout whole project duration |
| First Seminar | Incentives (i.e. snacks) | March 2018 |
| Completion of the lesson plan | Lesson plan, list of activities and topics of discussion, references | October 5, 2018 |
| First Fall semester seminar | Incentives | October 22, 2018 |
| Building relationships with the students | | The whole duration of the project |
| Last Fall semester seminar | | December 12, 2018 |
| Gathering of results | The survey, attendance numbers | December 12, 2018 |

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Appendix B

Final Survey

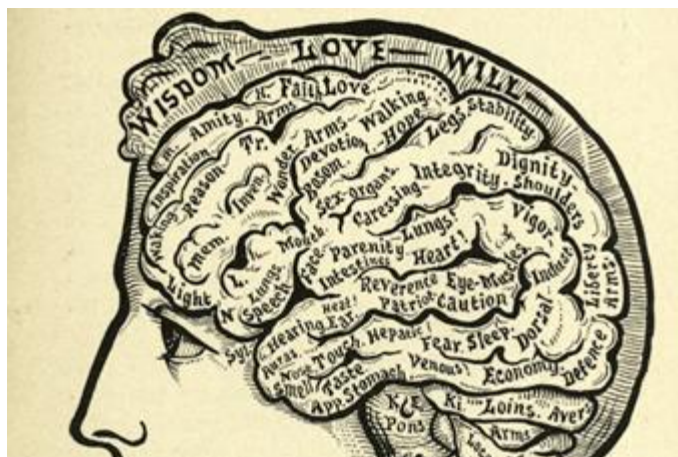
1. How has attending the mindfulness seminars affected you?

2. Have you used mindfulness techniques outside of the classroom?

3. What is the idea that you like most about mindfulness?

4. Would you want to continue attending mindfulness seminars or something similar to the idea? If so, explain why.

Appendix C



Mindfulness

s Seminar

with Intern Kristen

Learn how to focus on the present

Express emotions to those around you in a healthy and productive way

Interactive exercises and group activities

Everyone is encouraged to participate

First Session Starts Oct. 22 and will be every Wednesday at 12:30

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