

Integrating Mindfulness into School Physical Activity Programming

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Abstract

Mindfulness is a critical dimension in current school physical activity programs (e.g., physical education, intramural, and interscholastic physical activities). School physical activity programs are a key vehicle used in developing healthy active lifestyles among children and youth; however, the absence of mindfulness in these programs has given rise to numerous problems (such as body-mind dualism and stress) that interfere with attaining program objectives. This paper discusses what mindfulness is, why it is needed, and how mindfulness can be integrated into school physical activity programming. The integration of mindfulness can help develop a healthy lifestyle for a *whole* child; in turn, our school physical activity programs can be re-conceptualized and transformed to deliver this objective on a perpetual basis.

Introduction

School physical activity programs (e.g., physical education, intramural, and interscholastic physical activities) are essential to develop healthy active lifestyles in children and youth (Lu, Steele, & Barrett, 2010). In recent years, mindfulness has emerged as an explosive focus in research and practice in health and medicine (Didonna, 2011; Mars & Abbey, 2010). Despite its enormous potentials in the physical and mental health arena, there are very few studies that explicitly examine the use of mindfulness on school-related physical education or physical activity (e.g., Bain, 1995; Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009). This paper is intended to define what mindfulness is, to discuss why it is needed, and to illustrate how it can be integrated into school physical activity programming.

What is Mindfulness?

Let's share a Buddhist Zen story to illustrate what mindfulness looks like:

Once upon a time, two monks were traveling together. They encountered a young lady as they were about to cross a shallow river. It was obvious that the lady wanted to traverse the river but did not want to get wet. The older monk approached her and asked if she would like a hand. When the lady replied that she would, the older monk carried her

across the river. The lady thanked him and left. The two monks continued their journey, and after a little while, the younger monk could not hold his question any longer and asked, “May I know why you carried that lady across the water? As monks, we are not supposed to touch, or even look at females.” The older one responded, “Oh. Are you talking about the lady at the river? I already let her go, but you still carry her.”

From this Zen story, we learn that the older and wiser monk only focused his attention upon whatever happened to him in *present* moments (demonstrating mindfulness), while the younger monk dwelt in the past (indicating mindlessness). Mindfulness refers to the state of being fully engaged in the present moment, manifesting a *here-and-now* oneness, and not indulging ourselves in contemplation of the past or future (Francis & Lu, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009). The natural counterpart of mindfulness is mindlessness; Langer (1989) has depicted its destructive nature from three aspects: 1) being trapped by categories that were created in the past; 2) operating under automatic behaviour (being unaware of what one is doing); and 3) acting from a single perspective that lacks any impartial objectivity or judgment. Physical activity programs designed without a mindfulness component, therefore leave students with little understanding of kinesiology-based reflection, subjective knowledge, and the meaning of movement (Bain, 1995).

It should be emphasized that mindfulness is different from concentration, as the latter is related to a forced and singularly-focused oriented attention (Gunaratana, 1990). Certain convergent aspects characterize the practice or state of mindfulness, and they are fostered and encouraged when developing mindfulness as an undertaking. Examples of these aspects include: *mirror-thought*, which is seeing whatever is in front of us without bias or interpretation; *pre-symbolic*, where experiences are not labelled or interpreted strictly based on personal understanding; *non-judgmental*, such as accepting what we are experiencing without applying excessive opinion or assessment; *non-egoistic* (accepting the self as part of a whole, but not the centre of all activity); and *impartial watchfulness*, where all experiences, thoughts, or feelings are accepted in an equal fashion, as opposed to preferring one over another (Hanh, 1998; Gunaratana, 1990). Informed by these aspects, mindfulness can be regarded as a philosophy or skill to foster body-mind oneness and, ultimately, to achieve true health. A sample list of mindfulness practices and assessments is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

A sample list of mindfulness practices & assessments in physical activities

#	Items	1 (rarely)	2 (sometimes)	3 (fairly often)	4 (almost always)
1	I notice the sensation of my body moving or sweating when I am jogging.				
2	I am aware of my feelings and emotions without strong reactions to them.				
3	I pay attention to what I am doing, and do not feel I must <i>go, go, go</i> or that I am <i>running on automatic</i> .				
4	I do not rush through physical activities.				
5	I am not easily distracted.				
6	I am aware of my surroundings (e.g., layout of the gym, plants and trees in outside play fields, clouds in the sky, flow of the wind).				
7	I acknowledge my joy or sadness without excessive judgment.				
8	I think it is acceptable to make mistakes while learning physical activities.				
9	I can experience the present moment: <i>here</i> and <i>now</i> .				
10	I can accept myself, others, and my surroundings.				

Why is Mindfulness Needed in School Physical Activity Programs?

The problems of mindlessness and the benefits of mindfulness have been identified in general society (e.g., Langer, 1989), in general education (e.g., Brady, 2008), and in physical education (e.g., Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009). For example, many people today—including our teachers and students—often feel compelled to *rush, rush, rush* or *go, go, go*, or to keep up with the *rat race*. This mindset is referred to as *monkey’s mind* in Buddhist tradition (Komagata & Komagata, 2010). As Hanh (2006) remarks, “We often become so busy that we forget what we are doing or even who we are. I know people who say they even forget to breathe” (p. 2). Many individuals feel that they are not able to sit down and be quiet for a certain period of time—their minds always have to be occupied. These mindless practices give rise to numerous problems and challenges with our current education and personal well-being, such as a lack of body-mind connection in teaching practice, and high degrees of stress for both teachers and students (Lu, 2004).

Another issue is that physical activity is frequently interpreted as exclusively working out with the physical body—a typical body-mind dualistic perception. This body-mind bifurcation manifests itself in physical activity programs, by a primary concern with making the *body as an object* become strong and fit: the emphasis is on building up muscular strength and on burning calories to make the body thin, and preventing or curing obesity. However, people do not experience themselves or their bodies primarily as *objects* and, as such, the disconnect is unnatural. This type of practice reflects a narrow, exclusivist, and mindless approach to physical activity (Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009).

In response, a missing dimension has been identified, which can be conceptualized as mindfulness. The integration of mindfulness in school physical activity programs can help children and youth rediscover the lost *self*, the *inner self*, or *the true self*, and to regain a balanced life (Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009). In contrast to the mainstream approach in the West that tends to take an objectivist scientific approach to the body—viewing the body “from the outside” as an “object” to be understood—mindfulness focuses on the subjective lived or qualitative aspects of experiences in physical activity (Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009).

There is a pressing need to have a reflective, mindful, thoughtful component in our physical education programs, our intramural physical activity programs, and our interscholastic physical activity programs (Lu, Steele, & Barrett, 2010). All three programs should integrate mindfulness to help develop a healthier lifestyle for the *whole* individual (Lu, 2004). In addition to the benefits to body-mind unity and health, the integration of mindfulness may create a balance between subjective and objective knowledge in physical activity (Bain, 1995), help students enjoy the process (as opposed to the mere product) of activity (Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009), and cultivate natural movement (Lu, 2004). Furthermore, adopting a mindful approach in these programs leads to positive effects upon students that extend beyond the physical, such as attaining an acceptance of self (e.g., body image) (Stewart, 2004), acceptance of others (e.g., different races, abilities, cultures) (Thornton & McEntee, 1995), and improvements in their academic performance (Beauchemin, Hutchins, & Patterson, 2008). Practicing mindfulness in physical activities can help young people manage stress (Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011), maintain well-being (Brown & Ryan, 2003), and develop patience, trust, and openness (Kabat-Zinn, 2003); to conclude, it exposes them to these and many other benefits that will enhance their quality of health and happiness.

How Should Mindfulness be Integrated into School Physical Activity Programming?

There are numerous ways to integrate mindfulness into school physical activity programming. Teachers are encouraged to use the following principles and examples, or to employ them as catalysts to develop their own concepts for building mindfulness into their programs.

Teach Mindful Movement Disciplines

The popularity of Eastern martial arts and meditation practices in Western society is indicative of the need for more mindful approaches, in relation to school-based health strategies. Many Eastern movement disciplines, including Eastern martial arts (e.g., taijiquan, judo) and meditation practice (e.g., yoga, qigong), are effective ways to teach mindfulness. They share three core values: *philosophy* (learning about the universe, nature, and the human being); *health* (keeping fit, and preventing and healing disease); and *education* (teaching discipline and self-control) (Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009). Instructors who are inexperienced in these mindful movement disciplines may have concerns about introducing them to students; however, there are several work-arounds to this challenge. For example, teachers can learn these disciplines themselves for personal and professional benefits, in workshops or local community programs, or, if this is not feasible, they can invite experts from their communities or their students' families to voluntarily instruct a lesson or a unit at minimal cost. Fortunately, there are also many instructional materials such as audiovisual materials and books that can either be consulted or used in class to allow teachers and students to learn together.

“Mindfulize” Physical Activities

As the majority of existing physical activities in school are not particularly mindfully oriented, it is vital for the instructors to “mindfulize” them for their students. Three fundamental principles should be applied: 1) try sincerely to do every unique action in its own unique moment; 2) try to be aware of what we are doing and not rush through the process; and 3) try to pay attention to breathing in all physical activities, because the mere practice of “conscious breathing helps us return to the present moment” (Hanh, 2006, p. 12). Another important guideline is to avoid mechanical movements (especially in physical fitness training) and to strive to transform all physical activities into more natural movements. The rationale for this is that machine-like

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movement and body-mind dualistic behaviour arbitrarily inject unnatural and unhealthy repertoires into a live human being; they also devalue the beauty of the wholistic body-mind unity and drive people away from their *true self* (Lu, 2004). In addition, students should be encouraged to develop *mirror-thought*—to appreciate whatever they are presently experiencing, whether it be errors in learning, breathlessness in running, noises in ball bouncing, or the enjoyment of a particular sensation—rather than simply employing the skills to run faster, jump higher, or become stronger. Finally, practicing Western physical activities as guided by Eastern movement disciplines principles, can also be an alternative to “mindfulizing” existing activities (Markula, 2004).

Avoid Multi-tasking

Multi-tasking is a typical way in which we reinforce a body-mind dualistic process. For example, at the beginning of a physical education class, instructors often try to save time by giving instructions while students are stretching—in other words, while the body is doing one thing, and the mind is doing something entirely different. Instead, instructors should direct students to focus their attention to the sensation in the muscle they are working on during the stretch, and then should avoid giving any instructions not related to the stretch, while the stretching is taking place. This focus allows the students’ minds to connect with their breathing and movements to develop a body-mind oneness, as opposed to creating a dualistic relationship. In addition, students should be encouraged to practice independent physical activities in the absence of a musical or technical device (such as an MP3 player), to allow them to quieten their environment and concentrate on the inseparable connection between the body and mind.

Nurture an Appreciation of Subjective Experiences

Students’ subjective feelings, emotions, and enjoyment are critical to fostering a healthy active lifestyle. Mindfulness suggests we listen to our breath, know our heart beat, recognize our joy or dislikes, and even appreciate our pain or fatigue. In doing so, we can let the mind dwell in the body and have the body reside in the mind, thereby forming a body-mind unity. Where appropriate, the students’ subjective experiences should be assessed by the students themselves. Although mindfulness does not favour judgment, appropriate assessment is a tentative (although not the ultimate) method to help students appreciate their subjective experiences. There is

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presently a small selection of mindfulness test instruments available, but the majority of these tools were designed for adults. A sample list of mindfulness practices and assessments provided in Table 1 can be expanded upon to create checklist and rubric types of assessments for children and youth.

Accept the Self and Others

People with mindless tendencies are liable to hold rigidly categorized opinions that typically stem from past experiences and a single perspective: in other words, the standard ingredients in the recipe for prejudice, intolerance, and egoistic narrow-mindedness. Conversely, an open acceptance of oneself and others can foster a more beneficial body image, minimize bullying, decrease racial discrimination, and promote acceptance of our wonderful diversity of cultural pluralism (Ciarrochi, Kashdan, Leeson, Heaven, & Jordan, 2011; Rodgers, 2007). This mindset does not mean that we do not learn from past experience or evolve and improve ourselves, but rather that we embrace the present situation (above all else), in order to make reasonable progress. Such an approach also permits an individual to accept and appreciate mistakes or sad experiences to the same degree that they appreciate achievements and joyful experiences, as it is through error and learning that one can understand—and ultimately achieve—success and happiness.

Focus on the Process

As instructors we tend to lead (and even rush) our students to reach the teaching expectations or objectives that we have planned, but we don't usually remind students to appreciate the process of learning itself. While a goal-oriented practice may be productive, it often comes at the cost of generating psychological problems for the students (e.g., excess anxiety and stress), in addition to creating a mindless mentality. Arguably, all products that we establish (e.g., *goals, objectives, outcomes, expectations*), constitute only parts of a process in an individual's life; yet, students deserve to experience enjoyment of their participation in learning and practice throughout the process of all school physical activity programs. Therefore, it is our job to intentionally integrate mindfulness, in order for students to derive enjoyment from the process, and to encourage them to take pleasure in the work and the time commitment they put forth in anticipation of the outcome. For instance, in running activities, instructors should advise

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students to appreciate their sensations of breathing and muscle exertion during the activity, rather than simply focusing on how fast or how far they can run.

Appreciate the Surroundings

In a mindful state, students may start to experience inanimate surroundings (e.g., equipment, gym, playing fields) or the animate environment (e.g., flowers, trees, a group of students playing games nearby) in an impartial way. As these surroundings or environments have their own ways of being, becoming aware of them fosters an interconnectedness and wholism (Lu, Tito, & Kentel, 2009). While instructors typically like to use music to energize students in activities, they should also encourage their classes to appreciate the surrounding sounds around them (for example, the noise in the gym, or the sounds of birds or the wind when conducting class outdoors). Young people should be given the time to appreciate the beauty of their natural environment, wherever they happen to be. We do not have to search for beautiful scenery; rather, the beautiful scenery may be everywhere around us, which we only need our mindful awareness to perceive.

Integrate Mindfulness into Daily Life

Students spend the majority of their time outside school; therefore, in order to derive maximum benefit from mindfulness, it is essential to encourage and help students to extend what they learn about mindfulness to their daily life beyond school walls, and to actively promote mindfulness in the family and community. Such extension can be conducted through the four pillars (i.e., social and physical environment, teaching and learning, healthy school policy, and partnership and services) of the *comprehensive school health* framework (also called *health promoting school* or *coordinated school health*) (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2010). For example, students can be educated to appreciate school and community physical environment, and encouraged to advocate mindfulness at home. In addition, a number of studies have identified mindfulness as an effective method to deal with stress and many psychological problems that arise among students, their families, and community individuals (e.g., Chiesa & Serretti, 2009; Sibinga, Kerrigan, Stewart, Johnson, Magyari, & Ellen, 2011).

Conclusion

Research on mindfulness is booming in health science and medicine, particularly in psychological studies conducted over the past decade. Nevertheless, mindfulness has yet to garner the attention it deserves from both the education and the exercise/physical activity professions. The integration of mindfulness in school physical activity programs as proposed here is not an attempt to delegitimize present practice; rather, the intention is to further emphasize the need to re-examine our current practice, and re-orient our programs to ensure they are meaningful. It is critical for our educators to take progressive steps to integrate mindfulness in school physical activity programs: in so doing, the goals of these programs can be re-conceptualized toward enhanced wholistic wellness and harmonious body-mind oneness, thereby providing our students with valuable tools for building and maintaining a healthier lifestyle.

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