

Mindfulness and Nature

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to review the literature that is focusing on how mindfulness, natural environments, and children inter-relate. What mindfulness is, how it is embodied, the importance of dialogue and reflection in nature and the significance of place will all be discussed in this literature review.

Keywords: mindfulness, embodiment, dialogue, reflective practice

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What mindfulness is and why it is important will be recognized in the ideas of both Haskell (1999) and Bai and Scutt (2009), as they understand mindfulness as a sense being conscious in and with the world. How mindfulness is embodied physically and mentally is another topic which several of the articles have touched on, it is clear that the idea that “we are nature” (Russell, 1999) is held strong for many in the field of education and environmental education. Cohn & Hasharon (2011) share that the way in which mindfulness is understood is through a conscious



reflection and it is through dialogue that a more holistic world view is possible. It could be said that through dialogue and reflection, the practice of mindfulness is made visible. Place is what ties each topic together in bringing mindfulness to children in a tangible way. Place impacts children's understanding of what mindfulness means in nature and in experiencing a natural place children not only engage in focused meaning making but also self-empowerment and a deep personal connection to the world they are so intimately connected to. It is important to reflect and become more knowledgeable in how mindfulness can impact children if implemented in natural environments and how re-learning to be mindful co-exists with the need for inter-being with nature, especially as educators.

Mindfulness is being active in making meaning of the world. As proposed by Langer and Moldoveanu (2000), mindfulness is the feeling of a "lively awareness" and an "involvement in the present moment" (Frauman, 2010, p. 226). The research makes a point to invite readers to look at past history and how important our connection to nature is, the power of the act of mindfulness, and how mindfulness can contribute to not only each individual's future but also the future of the environment. As Livingston (1994) shares, "experiential undernutrition" plagues our society and I propose that nature can provide that extra nutrition. As an ever growing and adapting society, it is important to remember that we are wholly inter-connected and interwoven with the natural world. Power comes from living an active and conscious existence in which the world is intimately a part of who we each are. This is what I feel we as educators need to share with children. Let us each create our own current, indigenous ways based on the cultures, histories and stories we share with the land (Kimmerer, 2013).

Why Mindfulness and why in Nature?

For me, the ideas behind what it means to be mindful carry with it a certain sense of individual grounding, an awareness of the world, and the ability to wonder, critique and slow down while also being open to new understandings and possibilities. As Haskell (1999) writes, to be mindful is a “way of being... as a continuity of self, world, and wholeness” (Haskell, 1999, p.154). It is this wholeness, or connectedness, that is opened up through the act of being mindful. Nature is the catalyst in this literature review, in particular, how it is suggested that mindfulness approached in a natural environment reconnects and fulfills us. As Passmore and Howell (2014) share, nature acts as an aid in contributing to people being “fully flourishing human beings” and great changes could be seen if “as individuals we shift from an ego-centered view and lifestyle, to an eco-centered view and lifestyle” (Passmore and Howell, 2014, p. 383). Haskell (1999) argues that it is not grounding but groundlessness that shifts us to be more mindfully aware. By welcoming uncertainty, Haskell’s conceptualization of groundlessness, we are in turn thinking more about our being with nature and how being in that specific place has impacted our own lives and understandings.

Mindlessness, or living without consciousness, is what many of the articles’ authors want to mitigate or shift. As van Manen (1997) clearly states: “Consciousness is the only access human beings have to the world” (van Manen, 1997, p.9). It is this consciousness, or mindfulness, that allows for each individual to interweave themselves with others and the environment (Haskell, 1999). Hanh (1966) and Bai and Scutt (2009) describe mindful consciousness as inter-being. It “is a mode of consciousness that connects, integrates, and transfuses everything” (Bai & Scutt, 2009, p. 101). What many of the authors are connecting is mind and



matter. Bai and Scutt (2009) and Cohn and Hasharon (2011) each make a point of clearly sharing that the link between self and nature is inseparable and this unity is imperative to shifting from a dualistic separated world view to a coexisting, connected and whole world view. The literature also suggests that it is in embodying and being open to mindfulness that it makes the greatest impact.

Mindfulness Embodied

A mindful existence is understood physically by embodying the act, in being open and taking the time to be present in the place that one is in with your whole being. Van Manen (1997) offers that to follow a lived experience we each go through the process of reflection and making a memory. This memory holds strong as a reflection of our experiences and stories which build on our connection and relationship with the earth (Russell, 1999). This is especially significant for children as they are cultivating inclusivity and a “deep appreciation of other beings” while developing a relationship with the natural world (Bai & Scutt, 2009, p. 100). Through multiple forms of response, reflection and wondering we can make sense of what we have experienced and make meaning of the world around us. Haskell (1999) argues that being physically “with” the environment and also being wholly aware of the connection between self and environment are key to experiencing nature. Mindfulness then is put forward as an embodiment through the unification of how we each understand and experience nature both mentally and physically. This unification is what many of the authors give importance to as they argue that being mindful enables relationships with others as well as a grounding physical connection to the earth.

Simpson (1999) acknowledges that nature is more than simply a place to find ‘beauty’ but is an educator in itself and proposes that slowing down, attending to, and reflecting in nature brings the possibility of empowerment and deeper understanding. O’Donnell (2015) suggests that teaching mindfulness at a young age allows for “creative and deep attention... and ethical sensitivity, as well a richer experience of life” (O’Donnell, 2015, p.196). It is in incorporating mindfulness practices from a young age that children will become more aware of themselves, society and the environment. This embodiment of mindful practices in one aspect of children’s lives will hopefully be the reminder we need to open a dialogue of looking back at the history of the land and all who are interwoven in it. Authors Cohn and Hasharon (2011) and Kimmerer (2013) propose that by incorporating and showing respect for the story of the land and recognizing the connection between physical and spiritual self, our conscious relationship with society and the environment will be supported.

Dialogue and Reflection

Traditional Indigenous practices around the globe hold with them a certain history of both people and land. From an Indigenous knowledges perspective, humans are intimately connected to the natural world (Kimmerer, 2013). Simpson (1999), Kimmerer (2013), and Cohn and Hasharon (2011), suggest that bringing the perspective that humans are inseparable from the natural world back into practice is how we will be able to reestablish the connection between nature and human beings. Whether it is breathing with and in nature, or listening to the stories of the plants (Kimmerer, 2013), we are invited into a “mindful dialogue with the environment” (Haskell, 1999, p. 160) if we are open to our experiences with nature. “Sustained personal and communal reflection” (Russell, 1999, p. 126) is how Russell (1999)



proposes we keep an unbiased view of experiences with nature and how we might go about sharing a greater respect and connection with the natural world. Shifting and creating dialogue around our current views of how we operate and interrelate with the living world will hopefully open up communication with each other in relation to our world view as individuals as well as a society (Haskell, 1999).

The mindfulness literature supports the understanding that through reflection of personal experience, children and adults make meaning of the world and begin to develop their own world view. Reflection, in the case of mindfulness and children comes in many forms. As van Manen (1997) conceptualizes, one can only reflect on an experience after the fact. It is through “attentive thoughtfulness” (Van Manen, 1997, p.12) that enlightens someone to find meaning and understanding in an experience. By incorporating some of the practices of the past that intimately reflect the connection between self and nature, Cohn and Hasharon (2011) and Kimmerer (2013), believe a more holistic and balanced curriculum and education would be attainable. It is in being mindful and wholly recognizing that we coexist as a part of the complexity of the world where we establish relationships, make new meaning and connect (Kimmerer, 2013). This connection is only possible if we incorporate mindfulness into every aspect of children’s lives, not only outdoors but also in the classrooms. There is also a concern with disconnect and sustaining the stories and interconnectedness of human and nature that is of major concern for authors Cohn and Hasharon (2011), O’Donnell (2015) and Kimmerer (2013).

Place

“Water laps on the shores, continuously co-arranging the ecological sand of perception... the experiential world ventures amidst a rapid of relational possibility and waves of impassable impossibilities” (Haskell, 1999, p.160). The ideas of possibility and perception of the natural world are shared by several of the authors, especially in regards to nature as another teacher. Place connects us to feeling accepted and we “inter-are”(unity with nature)- when we establish a relationship and take ownership of a place (Hanh, 1966). Developing a kinship with nature creates possibility for an ecological sense of self to develop (Cohn & Hasharon, 2011), which environmentalists hope children will attain to better understand and care for the world. An ecological sense of self develops which enables a person to connect and see themselves not separate from but entangled with nature. This consciousness of self fosters an appreciation for existence as mindfulness brings with it gratitude, an “awakened mind-heart” and compassion (Bai & Scutt, 2009, p.101).

Returning to a natural place, time after time, promotes a sense of connection and an obligation to care in an individual as a relationship is developed. As children intimately get to know a place, by actively being with it, they are gaining not only control in the chaos but are also given permission to take more risks. This control changes an individual’s commitment to being open, reflective and engaging with what is in their environment (Frauman, 2010). Many cultures believe places carry with them their own histories; each with different feelings, insights and knowledge to share (Haskell, 1999). Within these histories there is a network of actions, rich interactions and shifts, which contribute to the power of reflection and being



mindful of the physical place as well as the energy of a place. Mindfulness allows for the possibility of histories to be shared, learned from and felt.

Conclusion

Place, especially natural places hold with them traces of story, history and culture (Haskel, 1999), being mindful of this will not only benefit the children who encounter the space but also the space itself. Establishing an ecological identity, fostering a well-rounded sense of self, and being open to possibility are all embedded in what it means to be mindful. Both O'Donnell (2015) and Feral (1999) share the idea of how being mindful can contribute to overall wellbeing as well as mental health, especially in youth. Mindfulness is embodied, it is a consciousness that shakes up as well as grounds how meaning and memories are made (Russell, 1999). This holistic approach to education will hopefully enable students to actively participate in their own meaning making, and provide them with the tools to acknowledge that all of the energies of the world are intertwined (Hanh, 1966).

Mindfulness in education, and especially outdoor nature based education, is making waves as new articles on the topic are surfacing monthly. What many scholars are now saying is that mindfulness has the power to shift education. It will enhance general well-being, motivation, and participation in education, creative and critical thinking, and give more responsibility to learning (Ritchhart & Perkins, 2000). The literature that I have reviewed seems to suggest that mindfulness connects children and education with nature, and will allow for a shift in the ways in which children make meaning of the world. Bai & Scutt (2009) put forward that mindfulness wholly embraces what it means to live an active life, not only active physically but also active mentally. This active life acts as a catalyst in reconnecting

and building the relationship between self, other, and the environment, causing changes and new understandings to emerge in all aspects of life. In being mindful that we coexist with others and the environment, we are helping to diminish the idea that it is natural to live in a dualistic society where human beings and the environment are separate from one another. Slowing down, getting to intimately know a place, and reflecting, hold great intellectual power and self-awareness that is, as some articles elude to, imperative to a young person taking on the chaos and wild of the world. My hope is that mindfulness will bring education and curriculum back to nature; where we are mindful of our interactions, our coexistence and the possibilities of learning from reflection and the natural world.



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