The Effects of Replacing Traditional Punishment with Mindfulness Practices in Schools

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Abstract

In an era where traditional punitive measures are increasingly critiqued for their efficacy and potential harm, this study delves into the effects of introducing mindfulness practices as disciplinary measures in secondary school settings. Situated in an urban school environment and spanning a six-month duration, the research employed a quasi-experimental design involving 40 students. Quantitative findings indicated a significant reduction in behavioral issues and an enhancement in psychological well-being among students subjected to mindfulness interventions. Qualitative insights, gathered from focus group discussions with educators and students, echoed these results, elucidating the transformative potential of mindfulness in fostering a positive learning environment. However, concerns were raised about the time and resources required for consistent mindfulness implementation. While the study offers promising insights, the results are bound by certain limitations, including a specific age and geographical focus. The findings underscore the potential of integrating mindfulness practices in educational settings, advocating for a balanced approach in school discipline that melds traditional and contemporary methods. Future research is recommended to explore the long-term implications across diverse demographics and settings.

Keywords: Mindfulness Practices, Traditional Punitive Measures, Secondary School Discipline, Psychological Well-being, Behavioral Outcomes

1. Introduction

Throughout history, disciplinary measures have primarily revolved around punitive actions. Traditional punishment methods, spanning from mild reprimands to more stringent consequences, have been employed with the belief that inducing discomfort can deter unwanted behaviors (Reed & Lovett, 2007). However, as societies evolve and the understanding of the human psyche deepens,

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there is a growing recognition of the need for alternative disciplinary approaches.

Mindfulness, drawing its roots from ancient Buddhist teachings, is one such approach that has been gathering momentum (Kabat-Zinn, 2016). It emphasizes staying present, being fully engaged in the moment, and developing an understanding and acceptance of one's emotions and thoughts. Schools, for instance, have started to replace detention hours with mindful moments, allowing students to introspect and reflect (Frank et al., 2013). Even in some correctional facilities, mindfulness programs are being piloted with the aim of reducing recidivism rates (Samuelson et al., 2007).

However, this transition is not merely a modern trend but is rooted in perceived inadequacies of traditional punitive methods. Critiques often highlight the potential harm—both physical and psychological—that such approaches might inflict (Durrant & Ensom, 2012). The recurring nature of offenses, despite the imposition of punitive measures, also raises questions about their long-term efficacy (Ramey, 2019).

The hypothesis underpinning this research posits that replacing traditional punishments with mindfulness practices yields more positive behavioral outcomes and enhances psychological well-being. Understanding this shift is not merely academic. The potential behavioral benefits, ranging from improved discipline to reduced aggressive tendencies, could revolutionize how societies perceive and address infractions (Goldstein et al., 2005). Moreover, embracing mindfulness can have cascading effects on mental health, community harmony, and educational outcomes. Schools, for instance, may witness a decrease in behavioral issues and an uptick in student engagement and learning.

It is essential to be aware of the specific focus of the study. It is directed at secondary school students aged 13-18 years to provide specific insights into this age group. It is centered on an urban school environment. Its primary focus is the replacement of traditional disciplinary measures, such as detention and suspension, with mindfulness practices. It does not encompass an examination of alternative disciplinary methods or interventions beyond mindfulness practices.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

Objectives of the study included to;

1. analyze the psychological and behavioral implications of replacing traditional punitive actions with mindfulness practices.
2. examine the long-term trajectories of secondary school students subjected to mindfulness-based interventions versus those who faced traditional punishments.

1.2 Research Questions

1. Does adopting mindfulness practices lead to more profound behavioral

change than traditional punishments?

2. How do mindfulness practices impact the immediate and prolonged psychological states of secondary school students accustomed to punitive actions?

2. Literature Review

Starting with the history of traditional disciplinary measures in educational settings, it is found that these practices have seen significant changes over time. As detailed by Arif and Rafi (2007), traditional tactics ranged from corporal punishments to more recognized forms like detention and suspension. Moving on to the rationale behind these punitive measures, Nelsen et al. (2013) shed light on the prevailing mindset of earlier eras. Historically, the belief was anchored in the notion that by instilling fear, educators could effectively deter misbehavior. This approach had deep roots in early educational philosophies, where discipline was often synonymous with strict obedience.

Transitioning to the origins and key principles of mindfulness, Ditrich (2020) provides a rich historical context. Drawing from ancient Buddhist teachings, mindfulness emphasizes the importance of being present, accepting emotions and thoughts without judgment, and cultivating a heightened sense of awareness. Focusing on the West, and particularly on the contributions of Jon Kabat-Zinn (2013), a significant shift in the perception of mindfulness can be witnessed. Kabat-Zinn's (2013) groundbreaking work introduced the concept of mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) to the Western world. This work, in particular, marked the beginning of a new era where mindfulness was recognized as a potent therapeutic tool.

Branching out from its religious roots, mindfulness has found applications in various sectors beyond Buddhism. Good et al. (2015) elucidates on its spread across fields, from clinical psychology to bustling corporate corridors. Further underscoring its widespread benefits, Williams and Penman (2012) highlight its potential to bring about improved mental health and boost productivity in their work. Diving into extensive research on punitive measures, there are compelling studies that have illuminated their potential drawbacks. For instance, according to Freer (2020), traditional punishments can lead to psychological harm, particularly in young minds. Moreover, there is a growing consensus, as revealed by Bear (2010), that punitive measures might not be effective for long-term behavior modification in educational settings.

Further complicating the picture, empirical studies underscore a concerning trend. Andrews and Bonta (2010) point out that despite the imposition of strict punitive measures, there is a marked recurrence of offenses. This brings to light the potential inefficacy of such measures in preventing repeat

transgressions. Transitioning to a more contemporary approach in schools, a wave of research has spotlighted the adoption and effects of mindfulness practices. Phan et al. (2022), McKeering and Hwang (2018), and Ager et al. (2015) have conducted extensive work in this area, showcasing how mindfulness can foster a more conducive learning environment by addressing student stress and improving attention.

Delving deeper into practical applications, schools are innovatively introducing specific mindfulness methods. In a pioneering study by Galante et al. (2021), schools that have incorporated mindful moments as an alternative to traditional detention found that students not only appreciated these moments but also showcased reduced disruptive behaviors over time.

Shifting the focus to the confines of correctional facilities, it is intriguing to note the foray of mindfulness practices within such settings. A comprehensive review by Simpson et al. (2018) provides insights into how jails and prisons have been pilot testing mindfulness interventions. Their findings suggest a deliberate move towards rehabilitation, as opposed to mere punishment. In terms of outcomes, they are nothing short of remarkable. Rainforth et al. (2003) conducted a rigorous analysis of inmates who participated in mindfulness programs. Their findings indicated a notable decrease in recidivism rates, suggesting that inmates equipped with mindfulness tools were less likely to reoffend upon release.

Navigating to broader applications, there is a rich tapestry of research underscoring the multifaceted benefits of mindfulness practices. Tao et al. (2021) shed light on its transformative power, highlighting improved discipline and curtailed aggressive tendencies among regular practitioners. Peeling back the layers of its psychological impact, Brown and Ryan (2003) offer a comprehensive exploration. Their research magnifies the role of mindfulness in fostering acceptance, enhancing emotional regulation, and bolstering overall well-being. These findings resonate with the idea that mindfulness not only changes behaviors but also deeply rejuvenates the mind.

Venturing into the potential pitfalls of mindfulness as an intervention, it is paramount to acknowledge that it is not a panacea. As detailed by Good et al. (2015), while mindfulness has its merits, it might not be the best fit for every individual. Some critics argue that it can occasionally lead to heightened self-awareness without providing tools to cope with the ensuing emotions.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Design

The study used a mixed-methods design to assess the impact of mindfulness practices versus traditional punitive methods on the behavior and well-being of students with disciplinary issues. The participants were 40 students

who were randomly assigned to either a control group (n=20) or an experimental group (n=20). The control group received conventional disciplinary measures, such as detention, suspension, or verbal reprimands, these measures were selected as they were established and regulated within educational settings in the study's locale, providing a realistic baseline for comparison with alternative approaches. In contrast, the experimental group engaged in mindfulness practices, including daily meditation, weekly reflections, and mindful moments.

The researchers used a behavioral checklist, based on the works of Hayes et al. (2023), to measure the frequency and severity of behavioral problems among the participants over a one-month period. They also administered culturally adapted versions of self-report questionnaires, namely the 'Mindfulness Awareness Attention Scale' (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' (Goodman, 1997), to assess the participants' mindfulness levels and psychological well-being. The adaptations, including translation, cultural sensitivity adjustments, and pilot testing, ensured the scales' relevance and efficacy in the local cultural context.

Additionally, they conducted focus group discussions with educators and students after the intervention to gather qualitative data on their experiences and perceptions. This was crucial for gaining deeper insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants, providing context and understanding to the quantitative findings. The inclusion of qualitative data was essential for a holistic understanding of the impacts of both disciplinary approaches, allowing for a more nuanced interpretation of the outcomes and contributing to a comprehensive view of the effectiveness of mindfulness practices in educational settings.

3.2 Sample of Study

A total of 40 secondary school students, aged between 13-18 years, from an urban school were selected for this study. The choice of urban schools was informed by research suggesting varied outcomes of mindfulness interventions based on geographical distinctions (Whitehead et al., 2015).

3.3 Sampling Technique

A stratified random sampling method was used, ensuring an equitable representation of gender, age, and socio-economic backgrounds among the participants. These variables were considered relevant for the research question, as they could influence the effects of mindfulness practices and traditional punitive methods on the behavior and well-being of students with disciplinary issues. By dividing the population into homogeneous subgroups (strata) based on these variables, and then randomly selecting participants from each stratum, the researchers were able to obtain a sample that was more representative of the

population and reduce the sampling error. Stratified random sampling also allowed the researchers to compare the outcomes of the intervention across different subgroups and increase the precision of their estimates.

3.4   Data Collection

Data were collected over a six-month period. The behavioral checklist was administered bi-weekly, while the questionnaires were administered pre- and post-intervention to discern any significant changes.

4. Data Analysis and Interpretation

Statistical analyses were conducted using the SPSS software. Paired t-tests were used to determine differences in pre- and post-intervention scores within groups, while independent t-tests were employed to identify disparities between the control and experimental groups. Thematic analysis was used to process data from the focus group discussions. Key themes and patterns were extracted, providing a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences.

4.1   Quantitative Data

The behavioral checklist aimed to record the frequency and severity of behavioral issues among the participants over the study duration. This quantitative data were supplemented by academic performance metrics, providing a comprehensive view of the impact of mindfulness practices. Additionally, to ensure a multi-faceted understanding, data were not only sourced from student self-reports but also included observations and assessments from teachers and parents.

Table 1

Average Behavioral Scores Over Six Months

Group	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6
Control (N=20)	8.2	7.9	7.8	7.5	7.3	7.1
Experimental (N=20)	8.1	7.5	6.9	6.3	5.8	5.2

Note: Lower scores indicate fewer behavioral issues.

Table 1 indicates a more pronounced decline in behavioral issues in the experimental group, which was exposed to mindfulness practices. This decline is further contextualized by incorporating teacher and parent observations, corroborating the numerical data. Table 2 offers a more detailed insight into the severity of behavioral issues for both groups.

Table 2
Average Severity of Behavioral Issues Over Six Months

Group	Month 1	Month 2	Month 3	Month 4	Month 5	Month 6
Control (N=20)	7.2	7.0	6.9	6.7	6.5	6.3
Experimental (N=20)	7.1	6.7	6.2	5.7	5.2	4.7

Note: Lower scores indicate less severity in behavioral issues.

In Table 2, the trend of diminishing severity of behavioral issues in the experimental group is evident, aligning with previous research and multidimensional data sources. The comparisons suggest that the mindfulness-based interventions in the experimental group positively impacted the students' behavior, both in terms of frequency and severity. The behavioral outcomes align with previous research indicating the potential benefits of mindfulness practices in reducing behavioral issues in school settings (Hayes et al., 2023).

To gauge the psychological well-being of the students, two primary tools were used: the "Mindfulness Awareness Attention Scale" (Brown & Ryan, 2003) and the "Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire" (Goodman, 1997). These tools were administered both before (pre-) and after (post-) the intervention to discern any significant changes.

Table 3 presents the average scores from the "Mindfulness Awareness Attention Scale" for both groups before and after the intervention.

Table 3
Average Scores on the Mindfulness Awareness Attention Scale

Group	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention
Control (N=20)	45.2	46.1
Experimental (N=20)	45.0	52.7

Note: Higher scores indicate greater mindfulness awareness.

Table 4 provides insights into the average scores from the "Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire" for both groups.

Table 4
Average Scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire

Group	Pre-Intervention	Post-Intervention
Control (N=20)	12.8	12.5
Experimental (N=20)	12.7	9.3

Note: Lower scores indicate fewer psychological difficulties.

From Table 3, it is evident that the experimental group, subjected to mindfulness practices, showcased a significant increase in their mindfulness awareness compared to the control group. This suggests that the mindfulness-

based interventions had a positive impact on the students' attention and presence.

The results indicated that the experimental group, as per the 'Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire' scores (Table 4), experienced a notable decrease in psychological difficulties following the intervention, in contrast to the control group. This finding not only corroborates existing literature, which highlights the positive impact of mindfulness practices on adolescent psychological well-being (Williams & Penman, 2011), but also provides empirical evidence from a controlled experimental setting. The study extends current understanding by quantitatively demonstrating the specific benefits of mindfulness in reducing psychological difficulties compared to traditional disciplinary methods, offering valuable insights for educational and psychological interventions in adolescent populations.

4.2   Qualitative Data

Focus group discussions with educators and students provided deep insights into experiences and viewpoints regarding traditional punishments and mindfulness interventions. The qualitative data were analyzed by multiple researchers to ensure diverse perspectives and minimize bias. This qualitative analysis was then cross-validated with the quantitative findings, painting a holistic picture of the impact of mindfulness interventions:

4.2.1   Educators' Perspectives

4.2.1.1 Efficacy of Interventions

Traditional Punishment: Some educators believed in the immediate efficacy of traditional methods. One of the participants stated:

"I've noticed that detention does stop disruptions momentarily, but the same students tend to end up back in detention within weeks."

Mindfulness Interventions: The potential long-term benefits of mindfulness were acknowledged. Another participant stated:

"Since we started the mindfulness sessions, there's a palpable change in the classroom environment. Students seem more centered."

4.2.1.2 Challenges Encountered

Traditional Punishments: The recurring nature of behavioral issues was a concern. A participant expressed:

"We give them detentions, but does it really teach them anything? I see the same faces every time."

Mindfulness Interventions: Initial resistance and time constraints were challenges. Another participant expressed:

"It was a bit rocky at the start; some students giggled or didn't take it seriously. But over time, I've seen genuine engagement."

4.2.1.3 Perceptions and Acceptance

Traditional Punishments: The familiarity of traditional methods was recognized. A participant said:

"Detentions are what we know. They're straightforward. But I do wonder if they address the deeper issues."

Mindfulness Interventions: The holistic approach was appreciated, though with initial skepticism. Another participant said:

"I was doubtful at first. Mindfulness sounded like a buzzword. But now, I see its value, especially in helping students manage stress."

4.2.1.4 Resources and Training

The need for proper training and resources was emphasized. A participant highlighted:

"I think mindfulness has potential. But we educators need proper training to guide our students effectively."

4.2.1.5 Long-term Impact

Educators were curious about the enduring impact of both methods. A participant stated:

"I'm interested to see where these students end up in a few years. Will mindfulness have a lasting effect? I hope we can track that."

In weaving together the quantitative data with these personal testimonies, it is clear that while educators see the potential in introducing mindfulness practices, they also stress the significance of comprehensive training, consistent implementation, and long-term tracking.

4.2.2   Students' Perspectives

The focus group discussions with students unveiled a myriad of emotions, experiences, and thoughts concerning both traditional punishments and mindfulness interventions. Several salient themes arose:

4.2.2.1 Resentment and Embarrassment

Traditional Punishments: Students often felt resentment and embarrassment. One of the participants said:

"Whenever I got detention, I just felt like everyone was judging me. It didn't make me want to change; it made me want to hide."

Mindfulness Interventions: Initial reactions were mixed, ranging from curiosity to skepticism. Another participant said:

"The first time we did a mindfulness session, I thought it was weird. But then, I started to actually look forward to it."

4.2.2.2 Perceived Benefits

Traditional Punishments: Some students acknowledged the immediate deterrent effect. One participant said:

"I won't lie, the idea of another detention did make me think twice about acting out in class."

Mindfulness Interventions: Many students felt a positive shift in their emotional well-being. Another participant said:

"Those 10-minute sessions? They became my daily reset. Helped me deal with a lot of stress."

4.2.2.3 Challenges Faced

Traditional Punishments: Some students expressed feeling labeled or stigmatized. One participant stated:

"After a few detentions, teachers just saw me as the 'problem kid'. It's hard to change when no one believes you can."

Mindfulness Interventions: Students spoke about the initial difficulty in

embracing the practice. Another participant said:

"It's not easy to just 'clear your mind'. Especially when you have a math test next period!"

4.2.2.4 Long-term Perspectives

Students reflected on how they envisioned the impact of these disciplinary methods in the future. One of the participants expressed:

"Detentions? In a few years, I'll just remember the boredom. But mindfulness? I think I'll keep using what I've learned."

4.2.2.5 Peer Influence

Some students discussed the role of their peers in shaping their views on disciplinary methods. One of the participants said:

"My friends and I used to make fun of the mindfulness sessions. But then, we all started seeing benefits, and now we even do it together sometimes outside of school."

From these candid testimonials, it is evident that while traditional punishments might offer an immediate deterrent, mindfulness interventions have the potential to leave a more profound and lasting impact on students' lives.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

The core of this study was to understand the behavioral outcomes of replacing traditional punishments with mindfulness interventions. The results, both quantitative and qualitative, provided enlightening insights into this shift. Firstly, the quantitative data indicated a more pronounced decline in behavioral issues among students subjected to mindfulness practices compared to those who faced traditional punishments. This suggests that mindfulness practices not only deter negative behavior but might also promote positive behavioral patterns.

One possible explanation could be that while traditional punishments address the symptoms (i.e., the disruptive behaviors), mindfulness practices target the root causes. By fostering self-awareness, mindfulness helps students recognize the triggers for their disruptive behaviors and equips them with tools to manage their reactions (Hayes et al., 2023).

Students subjected to mindfulness practices might develop improved emotional regulation, heightened self-awareness, and increased empathy – all of which can contribute to better behavior. As Hayes et al. (2023) posited,

mindfulness interventions could reduce behavioral issues by offering students a constructive way to process their emotions and reactions.

On the other hand, while traditional punishments such as detention might deter students from repeating certain behaviors due to fear of reprisal, they might not offer the students any deeper understanding or tools to manage their impulses. As previous research has indicated, punitive measures can sometimes lead to feelings of resentment, defiance, or alienation, which could, in the long run, exacerbate behavioral issues rather than mitigate them (Reed & Lovett, 2007).

Furthermore, the qualitative feedback from both educators and students provided a more nuanced perspective. Students in the experimental group felt that the mindfulness sessions offered them a "reset" and helped them handle stress better, potentially leading to fewer disruptive behaviors. Such personal testimonials underscore the holistic benefits of mindfulness, moving beyond just behavior modification to overall well-being (Frank et al., 2013). The realm of psychological well-being, especially in adolescents, is intricate. The findings shed light on the profound impact of disciplinary methods, both traditional and contemporary, on the psychological states of secondary school students.

Mindfulness practices, rooted in ancient teachings and contemporary therapeutic techniques, have been shown to foster a deeper sense of self-awareness and emotional regulation (Brown & Ryan, 2003). The study's results resonated with this, with students in the experimental group reporting improved scores on the "Mindfulness Awareness Attention Scale" post-intervention. This suggests that consistent mindfulness practices can indeed bolster a student's ability to stay present, thereby potentially reducing feelings of anxiety, stress, or overwhelm common in adolescence.

In contrast, students subjected to traditional punishments, such as detentions, showed little to no improvement in their psychological well-being scores. This aligns with existing literature that highlights the potential psychological harm of punitive measures, particularly in young minds (Goodman, 1997). Such measures might inadvertently perpetuate feelings of shame, alienation, or defiance, which could be detrimental to a student's psychological health. Moreover, the qualitative feedback from students illuminated the deeper emotional and psychological layers beneath their behaviors. Students subjected to mindfulness practices expressed feeling more "centered" and better equipped to handle academic and personal stressors. This anecdotal evidence further solidifies the idea that mindfulness not only addresses surface-level behaviors but delves deeper into the psychological underpinnings, offering students tools to navigate their internal landscapes.

The Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire scores, which assess

psychological well-being, further underscored this. Students in the experimental group displayed a marked reduction in psychological difficulties post-intervention, suggesting that the practice of mindfulness might have equipped them with coping mechanisms, improved self-awareness, and a more grounded perspective on their challenges (Goodman, 1997). Drawing parallels with existing research, the findings of the study align with the broader academic consensus. Mindfulness practices have been heralded for their potential to rejuvenate the mind, fostering acceptance, and enhancing emotional regulation (Brown & Ryan, 2003). On the flip side, traditional punishments, while perhaps effective in deterring unwanted behaviors in the short term, might not offer any substantial benefits to a student's psychological well-being and could, in some cases, even be detrimental.

6. Recommendations

Following are the recommendations from the study:

1. Integrate mindfulness practices into the school curriculum or as part of extracurricular activities, providing consistent exposure for students.
2. Provide thorough training for teachers in mindfulness techniques and principles, ensuring effective delivery and integration into the educational environment.
3. Engage parents through workshops or informational sessions to extend the benefits of mindfulness practices to the home environment, reinforcing what students learn at school.
4. Establish mechanisms for regular assessment of the mindfulness programs, allowing for the evaluation of long-term impacts on student behavior and well-being and making adjustments as needed.
5. Develop introductory sessions, use testimonials, and interactive activities to familiarize and engage students and staff with mindfulness practices, overcoming skepticism and resistance.

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