The Importance of Developing Mindfulness Based Ethical Curriculum
For Children and Adolescents

B. LaFleur

By their very nature of being young and inexperienced, children and

adolescents have a difficult time navigating moral and ethical territory. Choice

making is a learned behavior that is fostered by practicing deductive reasoning and

critical thinking.   This is a kind of thinking that is much more difficult for children

and adolescents diagnosed with emotional disturbance, including Fetal Alcohol

Syndrome (FASD) or autism.   For children and adolescents who are considered

neuro-diverse, their very brain ability for selecting a moral or ethical choice for a

particular dilemma may be compromised.

Ethics in School

Fenstermacher, Osguthorpe and Sanger, describe the moral education in

preschool through 12th grade schools as lacking and point to the current debate in

which the focus is on teaching children a moral code, rather than the much needed

prerequisite of moral formation which is critical thinking skills. They cite in

Teaching Morally and Teaching Morality, that "moral education," though a concern,

has not responded to the need for teaching children how to think, and "has blocked

us from attending to the more subtle ways that teachers, the larger society, and the

state bring moral matters into the classroom, even when they do not adopt specific moral curricula," (2009).

There is a need for teaching ethics to youth in school. With technological advancements, there comes a new frontier to be ethically scrutinized. Youth today are on the forefront of this exploration and as such are also the first to be victimized by its unethical use. Other ethical concerns for youth include, but are not limited to, choices they will make regarding drugs and alcohol, sex, violence, the environment, money, driving, and self-care. According to Williams, Yanchar, Jensen, & Lewis in their article *Character Education in a Public High School: A multi-year inquiry into unified studies* " an increased interest in character education is correlated with a rise in teen criminal acts both in and out of school and to the perception that irresponsible and destructive behavior is increasing," (2003).

Defining Ethics

The topic of teaching ethics found in literature is numerous. Similarly, religious texts throughout the ages have prescribed moral and ethical principals. Philosophers have even argued whether moral and ethical instruction is something that can be taught. Presently, the nurture and nature debate is in the forefront of moral instruction, (Hartwell, 1994). Piaget, Bandura, Erickson, and most recently Goldman in his Emotional Intelligence Model, have pointed to the assertion that ethic and moral instruction, including modeling and treatment, develop a child's life long character. In Goleman's *Emotional Intelligence Model*, the five components of being emotionally healthy are (1) Self Awareness, (2) Self Regulation, (3) Internal Motivation, (4) Empathy, and (5) Social Skills. Furthermore, schools have the

recourse to enable children to be able to act in ethical manners by modeling the practice of awareness skills, the recognition of thought and emotion, and the ability to self-regulate behavior.

It may also be asserted that the word character is most commonly defined as a person's moral and ethical compass. Huitt provides two "normative" definitions of character, which are as follows:

1. "engaging in morally relevant conduct or words, or refraining from certain conduct or words," (as cited in Wynne & Walberg, 1984);

2. "a complex set of relatively persistent qualities of the individual person, and generally has a positive connotation when used in discussions of moral education," (as cited in Pritchard, 1988).

Additionally Monteiro, Nuttall, and Musten, in the article *Five Skillful Habits: An ethics-based mindfulness intervention*, state there are areas of needed personal attention that not only inspires an ethical nature, but also encourage self-care. They cite the five habits as which, "(1) enhance physical health to reduce mortality; (2) develop appropriate generosity; (3) increase awareness of physical and emotional boundaries; (4) cultivate compassionate speech, and (5) increase discernment in consumption of physical and emotional nourishment, including use of necessary medication treatments," (2010).

Children with Emotional Disturbance

The promotion of ethical thinking for children and adolescents with emotional disturbance including brain-based disorders such as FASD and autism, depends largely on emotional regulation. As such, the fundamental construct

needed to teach emotional regulation is emotional identification. How can children be asked to regulate their emotions, when so often they don't know what they are feeling and why? It's not possible. Here in lies in the corner stone for building Golemans's characteristics of emotional intelligence, Huitt's definitions of character, and the Five Skillful Habits of mindfulness pointed to by Monteiro, Nuttall, and Musten.

Fundamentally, in order to be able to identify and regulate emotion, and therefore ethical judgment, there has to be adequate brain ability to do so. The brain is dominantly a response-conditioned structure. As such, repetitive actions, thoughts and emotions become the conditioned pattern when responding to life events. Habitual patterns of reactivity are what children learn from their care takers including teachers, parents, and relatives. As a child grows into adolescence, the dominant role model for ethical behavior is found in peers. By adolescence, many youth have learned responsiveness that is automatic, conditioned, and relatively unconscious. Reactivity becomes engrained as various stimuluses' trigger a "well-worn neuro-pathway," (Rothberg, 2014).

To gain the necessary tools in order to achieve the incorporation of these which attributes into the unconscious, and therefore an conscious response, there needs to be promotion of neuroplasticity and the hardwiring of neuro-networks in the areas of executive function, working memory and cognitive flexibility. These developing areas of a child's brain are important pathways in creating the necessary regulation skills. Executive function includes the ability to ignore distractions, delay gratification, and to finish tasks. A well-developed working memory promotes a

good memory and the ability to organize and manipulate information and ideas in the mind. Finally, cognitive flexibility promotes the "theory of mind" in a child and provides the opportunity to understand another's position and opinion, to accept and adapt to change.

To instruct emotional identification and recognition, there has to be an emphasis on how to become mindful of feeling states. As Ruedy and Schweitzer point out in their article, *In the Moment: The Effect of Mindfulness on Ethical Decision Making*, mindfulness is directly correlated to positive ethical behavior. They cite, "...individuals high in mindfulness report that they are more likely to act ethically, are more likely to value upholding ethical standards (self-importance of moral identity), and are more likely to use a principled approach to ethical decision making (formalism)," (2010). Additionally, the core of mindfulness-based instruction is to purposefully attend to experience and to the moment-to-moment choices therein, (Monteiro, Nuttall, & Musten, 2010). Therefore, the case will be made for implementation and integration of mindfulness training into school curricula.

Mindfulness Curriculum

During the last several years, several research-based mindfulness derived curriculums have been used with encouraging results. These programs were designed and implemented to create a positive social/emotional learning objective and decrease negative student behaviors. As cited in Jennings and Greenberg, these programs promote mental health and emphasize the importance of emotional recognition and regulation, (2008, pg. 7). In Jennings and Greenberg's meta-analysis

of classroom pro-social instruction in *The Prosocial Classroom* a review of educational research, they found successful, mostly mindfulness in nature, methods for preschool through high-school activities to promote ethical behavior, (2009). Black and Sussman, in *Sitting-Meditation Interventions Among Youth: A Review of Treatment Efficacy* asserts youth with emotional disturbance are helped my mindfulness based instruction. They cite, "sitting meditation seems to be an effective intervention in the treatment of physiologic, psychosocial, and behavioral conditions among youth," (pg.539). In a 2012 literature review by Rempel, *Mindfulness for Children and Youth: A Review of the Literature with an Argument for School-based Implementation*, the author writes, "Research reviewed here suggests that mindfulness-based practices can have a positive impact on academic performance, psychological wellbeing, self-esteem, and social skills in children and adolescents," (pg. 216). In addition, a 2013 pilot study of mindfulness training for high school seniors, Jennings found there was a 30% (Beck Anxiety Inventory) reduction of general anxiety, 9% (Interaction Anxiety Scale) reduction of social anxiety, a 55% (subscale of the BAI) reduction in cognitive distress after a 50-minute daily peer directed mindfulness meditation session in a trial lasting 4 weeks, (pg. 24).

Conclusion

The research evidence is abundant enough to support the ideas for creating mindfulness curriculums for schools.   Kataoka, Zhang, and Wells reported in their 2002 article Unmet Need for Mental Health Care Among US Children, that "Of children and adolescents 6–17 years old who were defined as needing mental health

services, nearly 80% did not receive mental health care, (pg.1551). There are many other considerations such as culturally relevant materials, age appropriate materials, and practical implementation; however, the lack of therapeutic mental health services for children and adolescents suggests to educators that the place of school would be a good setting to implement mindfulness based awareness programs. Additionally, research suggests that in doing so many children and adolescents with unmet mental health needs may be well served.

References

Black, D. S., Milam, J., & Sussman, S. (2009). Sitting-meditation interventions among

    youth: A review of treatment efficacy. Pediatrics, 124(3), e532-e541.

Fenstermacher, G. D., Osguthorpe, R. D., & Sanger, M. N. (2009). Teaching morally

    and teaching morality. Teacher Education Quarterly, 7-19.

Goleman, D. (2006). Emotional intelligence. Random House LLC.

Hartwell, S. (1994). Promoting moral development through experiential teaching.

    Clinical L. Rev., 1, 505.

Huitt, W. (2004). Moral and character development. Educational psychology

    interactive, 1-10.

Jennings, S. J., & Jennings, J. L. (2013). Peer-directed, brief mindfulness training with

    adolescents: A pilot study. International Journal of Behavioral Consultation

    and Therapy, 8(2), 23-25.

Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social

    and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes.

    Review of educational research, 79(1), 491-525.

Kataoka, S. H., Zhang, L., & Wells, K. B. (2002). Unmet need for mental health care

    among US children: Variation by ethnicity and insurance status. American

    Journal of Psychiatry, 159(9), 1548-1555.

Monteiro, L., Nuttall, S., & Musten, F. (2010). Five skilful habits: An ethics-based

    mindfulness intervention. Counseling et spiritualité, 29(1), 91-104.

Rempel, K. (2012). Mindfulness for Children and Youth: A Review of the Literature with an Argument for School-based Implementation. Canadian Journal of Counselling and Psychotherapy/Revue canadienne de counseling et de psychothérapie, 46(3)

Rothberg, Donald (Produced by Dharma Seed). (2014). Practicing with challenges , practicing with difficult thoughts and emotions (Podcast). Retrieved from http://www.dharmaseed.org/teacher/55/

Ruedy, N. E., & Schweitzer, M. E. (2010). In the moment: The effect of mindfulness on ethical decision making. Journal of Business Ethics, 95(1), 73-87.

Schlaug, G., Forgeard, M., Zhu, L., Norton, A., Norton, A., & Winner, E. (2009). Training induced Neuroplasticity in Young Children. Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences, 1169(1), 205-208.

US Department of Health and Human Services. (2000). Report of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A national action agenda.

Williams, D. D., Yanchar, S. C., Jensen, L. C., & Lewis, C. (2003). Character education in a public high school: A multi-year inquiry into unified studies. Journal of Moral Education, 32(1), 3-33