



Importance of Meditation in Education

KEYWORDS

Natasha Gupta

Research Scholar, Department of Education, N.A.S. College, Meerut. -Correspondance Author

There is growing interest in the integration of meditation into higher education (Bush, 2006). This article relates to the use of meditation to facilitate the achievement of traditional educational goals, to help support student mental health under academic stress, and to enhance education of the “whole person”.

A major factor preventing underserved children from learning is the stress they encounter on a daily basis – from factors like poverty, deprivation, lack of steady parental input, physical danger and constant fear. Research shows that chronic stress can impair healthy brain development and the ability to learn, and that Meditation, a stress-reducing technique can reduce stress and its manifestations – for example, anxiety, high blood pressure and cardiovascular disease and improve the academic performance of students.

Meditation is an essential element in all of the world’s major contemplative spiritual and philosophical traditions (Goleman, 1988; Walsh, 1999). In recent years, meditative practices have been taught in secular forms that do not require adherence to cultural and religious beliefs (Hart, 2007; Duerr, 2004; Kabat-Zinn, 1996). Meditation is different from relaxation training (e.g., Kabat-Zinn, 1996), which is characterized by progressive muscle relaxation and autogenic training. First, meditation involves witnessing events and experiences as they present themselves on a moment-to-moment basis; relaxation training involves the pursuit of a particular psychophysical state of reduced autonomic arousal (Shapiro, Schwartz, & Santerre, 2002). Relaxation may be a by-product of meditation, but it is not an objective of the practice. Second, relaxation is taught as a stress management technique to be used during stressful or anxiety provoking situations. Meditation, in contrast, is not a technique whose use is contingent upon stressful situations, but rather is conceived of as a “way of being” that is to be cultivated regardless of day-to-day circumstances (KabatZinn, 1996).

There have been a number of studies done correlating the effect of meditation on academic performance and the effect on at-risk behavior for adolescents and college students. There have also been a number of studies done which suggest that behavioral stress reduction via the meditation program may hold promise in the improvement of school related behaviors in youth. Research has shown that meditation produces improvements in mental health, including reduction of various forms of psychological stress such as depression, anxiety, hostility and emotional instability. Meditation has also been shown to reduce aggression and increase in overall relaxation in adults. One of the more important studies done by a team of researchers including, Vernon A. Barnes, Lynette B. Bauza and Frank A. Trieber took a look at the impact of stress reduction on negative school behavior in adolescents. With regular practice (at least once or twice a day), students will see improvements ranging from health and well-being to academic performance. Here are ten reasons to back up this enthusiasm, based on recent research published in peer-reviewed scientific journals.

1. Rise in IQ levels

Deep inside, everyone is an Einstein: students practicing meditation

benefit from increases in brain function across the board. Most dramatic increases occur in creative thinking, practical intelligence, and IQ (as measured by the ability to reason in novel situations, called “fluid intelligence”).

2. Academic stress goes down

Not only do their grades improve, but students who practice meditation report lower levels of stress. They also have better concentration, more alertness, and greater resistance to the physical effects of stress during exams.

3. Improved academic achievement

Meditating students show considerably improved academic performance — in one study, 41% of students allocated to the meditation group benefitted from improvement in both Math and English scores.

4. Better focus

Thanks to their minds calming down, students doing meditation report a whopping 50% reduction in stress, anxiety, and ADHD symptoms. This in turn triggers a positive chain reaction where an improved ability to focus better on tasks at hand results in increased brain processing and improved language-based skills.

5. Brain integrity & efficiency

Not only does meditating make the brain sharper, it also helps to make it a more harmonious unit: university students who took up meditation were found to have changes in the fibers in the brain area related to regulating emotions and behavior. Among other benefits, these changes again lead to better cognitive and intellectual performance.

6. Reduction in depression and anxiety

Doing meditation leads to significant reductions in depressive symptoms (an average of 48% lower than the non-meditating control group). And that’s apparently true for everyone, including even those who have indications of clinically significant depression.

7. Reduction in destructive addiction (drugs, alcohol)

There’s no harm in enjoying life. However, reigning in potentially addictive behaviour is a major key to success. Studies looking at both students and adults find that daily Transcendental Meditation practice greatly reduces both substance abuse problems and antisocial behavior. In many cases, TM has been shown to be two or three times more effective than traditional drug prevention and education programs. These results hold for all kinds of addictive substances — drugs, alcohol, cigarettes, prescription medications, and even food.

8. Lower absenteeism, better behaviour

First step to academic glory: don’t miss a class! Students who do meditation benefit from lower levels of absenteeism, lower levels of behavior incidents at school, and lower levels of suspension.

9. Lower risk of cardiovascular diseases

Stay healthy! Regular meditation practice helps students to reduce

blood pressure, anxiety, and depression. It will all pay back in years to come. As one study showed, students formerly at-risk of hypertension witnessed a major change in blood pressure already after a few months of meditating. These changes were associated with a 52% lower risk of developing hypertension later in their life.

10. Happier, more confident students

Last but definitely not least — research finds that students who meditate daily get higher scores on affectivity, self-esteem, and emotional competence. Various research has shown that meditation positively effects student test scores in

- ability to successfully reason in new situations;
- speed of information processing;
- ability to achieve and maintain emotional and physical well-being, succeed in work, love, social relationships;
- a cluster of traits including cognitive functioning, personality and social behaviour;
- balanced use of cognitive, affective and volitional domains (traits like comprehension, analysis, curiosity, unconventionality, synthesis, and risk/avoidance);
- Anxiety (with Transcendental Meditation practice anxiety reduced).

Meditation involves a three-step mental process where students are asked to:

1. focus their attention on a particular target (for example their own breathing, a sound, a sensation);
2. notice when their attention has wandered away from the target;
3. Bring their attention back to the target.

While meditation is an age-old practice, the scientific journey into the effect of meditation education is only just beginning. Detractors argue that it should not be introduced in schools until the long-term value is better known. Given the newness of the field, it is certainly true that the longitudinal research is yet to come. Adult samples show long-term benefits on well-being and brain functioning. The brains of young people are substantially more responsive to being changed through experience – a phenomenon known as neuroplasticity – than an adult's brain. This suggests the long-term effects of meditation are likely to be much more beneficial in school students than adults.

Some are concerned with how to fit meditation into an already overcrowded curriculum. However, the positive evidence of meditation has led large numbers of teachers to find time for meditation in school. There is a strong case for implementing meditation in schools. This can be done in a number of ways. First, meditation training can become a core part of teacher education so that all teachers are skilled in the use of mediation as part of their teaching toolkit. Second, schools can bring in evidence-based meditation curricula. Third, schools can introduce "mindful" moments into the broader school culture by starting school assemblies with a brief mindful practice, by having quiet sections of the school (such as certain school hallways designated as quiet zones) and by providing meditation spaces for staff and students in areas such as the library, well-being rooms and sections of gardens in the schoolyard. Schools can better recognise the aspects of the school that are already drawing on meditation without perhaps calling it that name. For example, many aspects of existing curricula in drama, music, art, physical education and outdoor education are already using meditative and attention-focusing techniques.

Finally, if meditation is to be introduced more widely in schools, researchers need to continue to measure the effects of meditation to find out how it works and when it works most effectively.

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