MEDITATION FOR PERSONAL GROWTH AND CONTEMPLATIVE PRACTICE: DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF MINDFUL AND REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS IN A TEACHER-EDUCATION CONTEXT IN MAURITIUS

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Abstract

MEDITATION, HOLISTIC EDUCATION AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The study of meditation in educational settings comes with questions about how best to teach it in the unique climates of colleges and universities (Shapiro et al., 2008, p.36). A systematic review of the existing literature by Ergas and Hadar (2019) suggests that previous empirical attempts have been complex and disparate, with the inquiry thus far addressing the subject matter in either one of the two following ways: (i) mindfulness in education, which consists mostly of “outsourced, secularized interventions aimed at improved mental-physical health, social-emotional learning and cognitive functions”, or alternatively, (ii) mindfulness as education, “which is a less common yet more transformative approach, manifesting in contemplative pedagogy in higher education and sporadic whole-school implementations” (Ergas & Hadar, 2019, p. 86).

To address the concerns of the research project, we drew from the frame of mindfulness as education to explore the potential value of using mindfulness-based interventions as a means to integrate a holistic philosophy in pre-service teacher education. This focus was driven by the presumptive capacity of the contemplative practice to facilitate the achievement of holistic education (HE) goals, specifically as it pertains to enhancing the education of the ‘whole person’, general wellbeing, and the development of specific dispositional skills fundamental to the learning and teaching process, for example attention, introspection, critical and creative thinking, to name a few.

HE distinguishes itself from other frameworks for education as it draws from primordial Western and Asian cultural discourse in order to embed within the education process, a spiritual, or affective, perspective (Miller et al., 2012). In this regard, HE has been broadly described as an educational approach that maintains a fundamental objective of fostering the development of the ‘whole person’. The ‘whole’, as Miller (1990) puts it, includes the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and - in a secular sense - spiritual. Grounded in the perennial philosophy, spirituality is an embedded component of the holistic philosophy, and therefore it is the tenet which fundamentally guides the practices and philosophy of HE.

INTRODUCTION

A research project was carried out from 2019-2020 to explore trajectories in which meditation, as a spiritual dimension in holistic education, could be integrated into a formal teacher-education setting in Mauritius, notably for secondary level trainee-educators in physical education, in view of informing practice, policy, and programme development at local institutional level. Additionally, the project explored how meditation could be used to encourage and develop reflective communication skills, in view of developing mindful and reflective practitioners, notably through mindfulness activities (Miller, 2007). Research in the exploration of meditation in higher education is scarce (Shapiro et al., 2008) and both the project and this paper intend to contribute to the body of knowledge from a teacher-education context.

In the context of the research, meditation was viewed from a trifocal lens: first, as part of the meditative recursive basis (Bang & Døør, 2007), which is part of the spiritual dimension of a holistic perspective on life, inclusive of education; second, as a mediator of the relationship with the self, facilitating dialogue and introspection, and third, as a stress-mitigator. The theoretical framework was grounded in holism (Forbes, 2003; Miller, 2000; 2007; Schreiner et al., 2005) and dialectical holism (Bang & Døør, 2007). Building from the general aim, the specific objectives of the research were: (1) to explore whether the pre-service secondary school trainee-educators had an awareness of the concept of holism, and thus, holistic development, and the spiritual dimension thereof; (2) to explore how meditation can be integrated in a formal teacher-education setup; (3) to investigate the interface between meditation and reflective communication skills. For the purpose of this paper, we will focus on the third objective of the research project so as to focus the discussion around the insights gained with regard to using meditation for personal growth and contemplative practice, and developing a culture of mindful and reflective practitioners in a teacher-education context in Mauritius.
The study of meditation in educational settings comes with questions about how best to teach it in the unique climates of colleges and universities (Shapiro et al., 2008, p.36). A systematic review of the existing literature by Ergas and Hadar (2019) suggests that previous empirical attempts have been complex and disparate, with the inquiry thus far addressing the subject matter in either one of the two following ways: (i) mindfulness in education, which consists mostly of “outsourced, secularized interventions aimed at improved mental-physical health, social-emotional learning and cognitive functions”, or alternatively, (ii) mindfulness as education, “which is a is a less common yet more transformative approach, manifesting in contemplative pedagogy in higher education and sporadic whole-school implementations” (Ergas & Hadar, 2019, p. B6).

To address the concerns of the research project, we drew from the frame of mindfulness as education, conceptualized as a form of contemplative practice to facilitate the achievement of holistic education (HE) goals, specifically as it pertains to the education of the whole person, general wellbeing, and the development of specific dispositional skills fundamental to the learning and teaching process, for example attention, introspection, critical and creative thinking, to name a few. HE distinguishes itself from other frameworks for education as it draws from primordial Western and Asian cultural discourse in order to embed within the education process, a spiritual, or affective, perspective (Miller et al., 2012). In this regard, HE has been broadly described as an educational approach that maintains a fundamental objective of fostering the development of the whole person. The ‘whole’, as Miller (1990) puts it, includes the intellectual, emotional, physical, social, aesthetic, and - in a secular sense - spiritual. Grounded in the perennial philosophy, spirituality is an embedded component of the holistic philosophy, and therefore it is the tenet which fundamentally guides the practices and philosophy of HE.

At its most basic conceptual level, meditation is understood as a form of contemplative practice (Miller, 2014). Essentialist components of most major contemplative, spiritual and philosophical traditions, meditation and meditation practices find their conceptual bearing in the Asian cultural and Buddhist religious wisdoms (Miller, 2019). While the oriental perspective would suggest an intrinsic transcendental characterization, the progressive popularization of meditative practices in the West increasingly lead to an empirically pervasive secular conception of meditation by the early 1980’s. In this regard, initial investigations into the therapeutic benefits of mindfulness practices in medicine and mental health brought about new considerations to the traditional understanding of meditation as being purely a form of religious practice (Birchinall et al. 2019), with initial studies suggesting the potential therapeutic benefits of mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs), such as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), in reducing chronic pain, stress, and mental health illnesses in clinical populations (Grossman et al., 2004).

It is important to mention that the secular approach embodied within mindfulness-based interventions is often characterized by the two distinctive attributes of meditation which have seen the most emphasis in the empirical literature: mindfulness and concentration (Shapiro et al., 2008). Concentration meditation involves single-pointed awareness of the mind, for example emphasized concentration on breathing. It requires focus and fosters a sense of calmness. Alternatively, mindfulness meditation is defined as a state of meta-awareness, involving “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). It requires an ability to sense and be receptive, thus, generating clarity and encouraging insight (Gyatsho, 2006).

In this regard, the seminal definition of the word which sees the most frequent application in the current literature is “intentional training of attention and awareness, such that the conscious becomes more finely attuned to events and experiences in the present” (Shapiro et al., 2008, p. 194). This broader, more universal conceptual definition englobes the core elements common to most, if not all, forms of current meditative practices (adapted from Shapiro et al., 2008): (i) Intention - conscious and purposeful regulation of attention; (ii) Attention - ability to sustain attention in the present moment, without interpretation, discrimination or evaluation; (iii) Attitude - frame of mind brought about by the meditative practice, also called openness and acceptance. The implication of conceptualizing meditation in this secular way is particularly significant for the exploration of meditation in areas of inquiry that fall beyond the religious sphere. Of particular salience to the current inquiry, the secular definition broadens the scope for the exploration of meditation in the academic setting, which more often than not, ascribes to a non-dogmatic culture (Ergas & Hadar, 2019).

Meditation implies moment to moment observation of experiences as they present themselves (Shapiro et al., 2008). It emphasizes persistent active consciousness in the present moment (Gyatsho, 2006). In contrast, relaxation is simply the reduction of autonomic and muscle stimulation in the body (Shapiro et al., 2008). Often regarded as a coping mechanism to deal with stressful and anxiety provoking situations, Shapiro et al. (2008) argue that relaxation is not the objective, but rather a consequence of meditation. Therefore, meditation, which is “not contingent on stressful situations”, is regarded as a “way of being that is to be
coined by Dr. Dan Siegel, ‘mindsight’ is a kind of focused attention that allows us to see the internal workings of our own minds, helping us reduce the “autopilot” of ingrained behaviors and habitual responses, and letting us ‘name and tame’ the emotions we experience, rather than being overwhelmed by them. From https://www.drdansiegel.com/about/mindsight/

Contemplation is the act of deep reflective thought. From the spiritual angle, “contemplation is a way of knowing” and “the awareness of happenings inside and outside one that influence one’s own self” (Gyeltsen, 2006, p. 29). Meditation and associated meditative practices represent the methodological manifestation of this process. Consequently, meditation may be interpreted as a “technique of contemplative practice” (Gyeltsen, 2006, p. 29). A synthesis of Western ideas and Eastern wisdom traditions, holistic education applies the practices of contemplative disciplines to education as a means to imbue an experience of “compassion, awareness, and insight” into the learning process (Gyeltsen, 2006, p. 31). Considered by Gyeltsen (2006, p. 32) to be a “transformative, integrative and a collective enterprise”, contemplative practices aim to develop the whole person in the broadest conceivable way, “through forms of inquiry and imaginative thinking”.

Underpinned by the idea that the education of teachers is not solely dependent on development of “good intentions and technical skills”, a contemplative pedagogy in education, and therefore a holistic approach to education, draws from the transformative dynamics of meditative practices and healing traditions, as a means to develop those qualities that both generates essential insights in all areas of life, and extends “beyond the reductionist, materialist conception of our world” (Zajonc, 2009, p. 15). Essentially affective in its conception, the contemplative practice encourages emotion regulation and stress mitigation, while simultaneously improving attention, the development of which is a requisite for efficient cognitive performance (Miller, 2019). One approach to address the fragmentation generated by the systemic pressures of the current culture of education, would thus involve the integration of meditative and mindfulness practices as a means to converge the cognitive and the affective dimensions of education (Hart, 2004).

Strategies within contemplative approaches to education have as their goal to enrich learning at all three levels of inquiry, with “due attention to the education of the emotions, in order to cultivate transformational mindsight responsible for greater stability and equanimity” (Gyeltsen, 2006, p. 33). Mindsight, or mindfulness, is our ability to understand and perceive both our own mind and that of others. The translation of mindsight into holistic education has been theoretically associated to intuitive insight. Intuitive insight, which involves introspection and reflection, is responsible for developing the essential qualities (i) required by all forms of education which have as objective the development of the whole person (interpersonal relationship functioning, creativity, self-compassion, empathy) and (ii) are essential to the “promotion of community trust and the common good” (Hyland, 2011, p. 192).

Palmer (1998) contends that ‘whole teaching’ is built upon the components of the teacher’s identity and integrity, and it is the contemplative approach which presupposes the developmental growth of teachers’ habits of mind and heart. In support of the contemplative emphasis, Miller (2019) attributes the notion of the ‘whole teacher’ or ‘reflective practitioner’ to the concept of teacher presence, in order to portray a fundamental quality of teacher disposition. Taken from the point of view of the holistic curriculum, Miller (2019) argues that HE should foster connections between the learner and the community, which is a process that begins in the classroom. Key to creating community in the classrooms is the need for the teacher to create a psychologically safe environment. He discusses that in addition to patience and empathy, which are key interpersonal skills contributing to this process, it is simply by being present and mindful that one can make the most impact. He further maintains that “meditation and mindfulness practices are simple yet powerful ways that teachers can enhance their presence” (Miller, 2019, p. 207).

Conceptualising the importance of disposition is not a novel narrative within the context of teacher education. The cultivation of teacher disposition is a fundamental component of human development, one which is enabled through mindfulness training and meditation. Concomitantly, training in mindfulness-meditation has been deemed the bedrock mechanism that functions to prepare teachers for the successful enactment of a holistic curriculum. The research project attempted to expand on the existing research in this significant area of teacher development, notably by exploring the experience of pre-service trainee teachers, learning and using meditation for personal growth and contemplative practice, so as to develop a culture of mindful and reflective practitioners within the teacher education setting.
METHODOLOGY

An exploratory case-study method was used with a purposive sample of 28 pre-service secondary level trainee-educators at a tertiary level teacher education institution in Mauritius, as the site of study. The exploratory case-study had two axes in line with the project objectives (see introduction section of this paper); the first objective constituted the first axis, and the second and third objectives constituted the second axis. The first axis necessitated a reflexive introspection from the participant trainee-educators; for the first axis, questionnaires were used to gather data from the participants with respect to awareness of the concept of holism and holistic development. For the second axis, data was collected through observation, where regular 20-minute meditation sessions were held, open-ended questionnaires, and reflective journaling to elicit deeper experiential data from the abovementioned participants.

The meditation sessions were based on information gathered in the literature review and the lead investigator’s prior knowledge and training as a meditation coach. Informed by the literature, the sessions with the participants were focused on the spiritual dimension of holistic education through meditation and mindfulness as contemplative, creative, and reflective practices. These aspects of holistic education and holistic development are present in the National Curriculum Framework Secondary (Ministry of Education and Human Resources, Tertiary Education and Scientific Research, 2016) for Mauritius, and the notion of the critically reflective practitioner is also visible in the teacher-education curriculum of the institute in which the research was undertaken.

Prior to commencing the meditation sessions, one general meeting was held with the participants to inform them about the project in general. Six meditation sessions were organised and carried out with the participants; one session was done each week for a duration of 6 weeks in the semester. The meditation and mindfulness sessions were all oriented around participants’ development of the ‘self’, geared towards their personal growth in terms of the ‘self’ within their own bodies and beings, and in connection with others, within the holistic perspective. As noted above, the participants were asked to keep a regular reflective journal to write about their experiences, feelings, and general thoughts after each session. They were told that they could express themselves freely and as creatively as they would wish. The journals were also used for them to reflect on and respond to specific questions set during the session and that these reflections could also continue beyond the session and be completed at home.

The main ‘themes’ of the meditation and mindfulness practices were developed with a consideration of the guiding principles of mindful observation, mindful awareness, mindful listening, mindful immersion and mindful appreciation (Chödrön, 2001; Nhất Hạnh, 1999). The six meditations were organised with the following foci and two sessions allocated for each: (1) Breathing/breathwork; (2) Mindfulness of self, body, and surroundings; (3) Art/creative expression. Data collection was carried out through four interconnected methods to gather responses and insights in relation to the research aims and questions of the project. These four methods were questionnaires, participant observations, participants’ reflective journals, and focus group discussion (FGD). Questionnaires administered before commencing the six meditation sessions and post implementation at the end of the six weeks. Participant observations which were used to keep a record of the sessions carried out and any salient discussions or events that emerged. Participants’ reflective journals, used for the participants to keep a record of their own thoughts, feelings, experiences, any form of creative expression that they wished to include, and post-meditation reflection questions and prompts geared towards the participants’ self-awareness of their personal growth, compassion and appreciation of the ‘self’. The FGD was carried out online a few months after the meditation sessions had ended to gather the participants’ experiences, feelings, and understandings of the six sessions from a retrospective point of view.

The FGD was geared towards gaining insights on the participants in relation to their development of intention (conscious and purposeful regulation of attention), attention (ability to sustain attention in the present moment, without interpretation, discrimination or evaluation), and attitude in terms of their frames of mind for openness and acceptance (Shapiro et al., 2008). Two different approaches were used for data analysis. Grounded theory analysis was used to elicit relevant data pertaining to the research questions on ways meditation, as a spiritual aspect of holistic education, can be integrated into a formal teacher-education setting, and the dynamics linking meditation, contemplative practice, and reflective communication skills. Typology analysis was used as a more traditional method of analysis for identifying the extent of pre-service teachers’ awareness of holistic education, and the spiritual dimension within, and was based on categorizing responses in terms of frequency and insightfulness. According to Punch (2009), Grounded Theory uses a broad approach in order to capture new perspectives, which after being highlighted, are further examined in subsequent research. Data is subjected to grounded theory analysis at 2 levels of coding: (1) open coding, and (2) axial coding. At each level of coding a new set of themes emerged through increasingly theoretical connections. At first the coding is done more inductively with the second stage of theory generation done more deductively. In other words, the process of coding defines the direction of the investigation, and then further inquiry is based in that same direction.
A coveted, yet theoretically ambiguous, consideration within the realm of teacher education pertains to the best practices and processes for the cultivation of reflective practitioners (Zeichner, 2009). In the current study, the theme of reflection arose in two ways: (i) reflection-in-action, whereby the process of learning meditation is described by participants as a continual feedback loop with respect to the self and relational awareness, and (ii) reflection on the personal, whereby the content of participants’ reflections was more focused on their personal lives, and this, in turn, unearthed deeper insights related to self.

**Reflection-in-action**

Reflection can be recognised as a dialectical process (Bang & Døør, 2007) whereby one defers immediate judgments and preconceptions in favour of accommodating a more careful consideration of one’s actions and decisions (Soloway, 2006). The concept of reflection within action was first emphasized by Schön (1983, 1987) who, in his early formative texts on professional practice, makes a conceptual distinction between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. While reflection-on-action implies retrospection regarding what took place in practice, and a subsequent re-appraisal in order to improve on further endeavours, reflection-in-action implies awareness and modification while in the very midst of the practice itself. According to Schön (1983), it is reflection-in-action which represents a considerable alternative for adaptive problem solving among professionals. As Soloway (2006, p. 112) elaborates, “rather than relying on technical knowledge from fixed sources (i.e., solving problems based on existing theory), reflection-in-action relies on the identification and assimilation of feedback while in the midst of practice”. Here, reflection shapes the unfolding of action. Training in mindfulness supported participants in cultivating the skills and abilities to revisit present moment awareness during key moments in their day, enabling them to choose a best course of next action:

[... it helped me to think much more before speaking with people. In moments of anger, or even at any moment, I got used to thinking differently before, for instance, hurting someone— before saying things that shouldn’t be said. I learnt not to see things or situations in only one way, but in the different ways that a situation may play out. (Female Respondent 9; translated from French)]

Mindfulness practice is a key pedagogical strategy for preparing new teachers for reflection-in-action because it cultivates present moment awareness, i.e., regulating one’s awareness on a continual moment-by-moment basis. Whereas most reflection in teacher education is conducted as reflection-on-action, the practice of mindfulness meditation contributes to the skills of reflection-in-action. That is, mindfulness practice may cultivate the teacher’s aptitude for returning to the present moment in order to check-in with oneself, and to respond more acutely and more appropriately to, for example, an unfolding lesson and to the particular students that are involved. Often, teachers are simply caught up in the busyness of teaching in the classroom setting, and thus neglect their own moment-to-moment awareness of how the class is unfolding, so they miss the opportunity to be aware of how their teaching and the class are unfolding in real time. Mindfulness practice may be a form of reflection-in-action that is transferable to the classroom, i.e., for interacting with students, regulating emotional reactions such as impulsivity, and responding skillfully to challenging situations.

**Reflection on the personal**

Participants’ reflections included various aspects of their lives, from the emotional and social to the physical and spiritual. Many of these personal dimensions have been recognized as important content for reflection in teacher education (Korthagen, 2004).

*I would say that the meditation brought some reflective thinking. Perhaps, I would say this because we tried to reflect on ourselves. Like, where we are situated, what are we facing, what are we going through, or what we went through in the past. So, all these come together, and you see where you stand right now. So, when all this accumulates, you really get a vibe. Like alright, you know this is something that is really happening to you. Sometimes with the busy life that we have, we don’t have a lot of time to reflect on what we’re going through. So, this little time it’s just you with you. And, I believe that spirituality in some way— for me, spirituality is not connected with religion at all. It’s mostly about light that you try to find within yourself, connect with the universe, trying to find answers, trying to know what you should do to just boost up yourself and so on. So yes, it is very, very reflective. (Female Respondent 2)*

Investigating personal dimensions brings to focus an often-neglected distinction within professional preparation, namely the person in the profession (Soloway, 2006). Personal beliefs, values and habits apprise a teacher’s practical knowledge, that is, knowledge that is favourably regarded within a holistic approach to teaching (Connelly et al., 1997). Furthermore, maintaining a personal focus represents what Korthagen (2004) and Soloway (2006) describe as “core reflection.” Core reflection, as Korthagen (2004, p. 91) notes, may “counter the unconscious socialization and adaptation to a traditional school culture,” and “helps students direct their own development in accordance with their personal identity, and their inspiration and enthusiasm for their profession.” According to Soloway (2006), this conception is appropriate in responding to the current climate of professional training programs in higher education, as “it corresponds to a need to make pre-service teachers’ reflective curriculum more meaningful and relevant.”
Importantly, it was noted that engaging in a process of personal growth nurtured the trainee teachers’ wellbeing and resiliency. One key aspect in developing a paradigm of personal growth is developing a reliance on self-knowing, in which pre-service teachers seek knowledge from within. Indicatively, and what is generally considered as a key area of personal growth and professionalism, participants expressed learning to trust their own experience in opposition to looking outwards for approval or affirmation. According to Soloway (2006), a paradigm of personal growth includes “an ongoing process of introspection, where one’s life is viewed as a journey”, and challenges that present themselves are viewed as “opportunities for growth”. In this way, a paradigm of personal growth is an example of a commitment to life-long learning where one’s life is the content focus of ongoing learning.

Empathy and self-compassion
Creating a space for pre-service teachers to engage in a deeper process of personal growth is an important process of adult development, and therefore teacher development, as it calls forth the complexity of participants addressing more deeply seated personal issues. Notably, within the intervention program, teacher candidates often faced personal challenges such as anxiety, stress, negative body image, etc. For many, the mindfulness-based sessions were instrumental in providing a tangible and objective prospect for self-guided, yet scaffolded, personal growth. The meditation sessions were deemed by participants to be a “safe space” to consider (for some, the first time) how their personal challenges may be influencing their teacher training experiences. These personal reflections led many to develop often unexplored feelings of empathy towards the self and incrementally (i.e., over the course of the six weeks) lead several participants to manifest, and also come to terms with or accept, notions of self-compassion. It should be noted that some participants expressed an extrapolation of these manifestations of empathy and self-compassion into their wider context, specifically noting early signs of the development of an empathetic regard for the struggles of others, after having addressed, reflected on, and accepted their own. We note, here, the manifestation of compassion and empathy for others which is expressed as a result of reflexivity through mindfulness.

CONCLUSION

This paper provided insights into some of the findings from a funded research project on the exploration of trajectories in which meditation, as a spiritual dimension in holistic education, could be integrated into a formal teacher-education setting in Mauritius. The focus, for this paper, was the interface between meditation as a contemplative practice and reflective communication skills, which was one of the three objectives of the original research project. A tri-dimensional conception of meditation was adopted to inform the theoretical and methodological aspects of the study, aligned with an exploratory case-study method which was used with a purposive sample of 28 pre-service secondary level trainee-educators at a tertiary level teacher education institution in the local context.

The findings have shown that the adoption of meditation and mindful-meditative practices had direct positive consequences on three key areas: the development of alterity and reflexivity in communication; the development of consciousness and awareness of the self within the teaching context, and the cultivation of empathy and compassion of the self and others. Meditation was found to create the conditions for the participants to be more aware of their positionality within the communication process, notably through the engagement with introspective work that, in turn, allowed them to develop an added layer of reflexivity. This, enabled them to converge towards reflection-in-action by helping them regulate their awareness on a sustained moment-by-moment basis because the meditations as contemplative practices cultivated present moment awareness. Consequently, they were more aware of their own implication in the communicational processes, which helped them operate relevant pragmatic choices, as individuals and as future educators. These findings were valuable for the reflections presented here in relation to the potential of meditation for developing a culture of mindful and reflective practitioners in teacher education.

Engaging with meditative and mindfulness practices allowed the participants to develop consciousness and awareness on their own personal beliefs and axiological systems. This is an important aspect in holistic approaches to teaching and opens pathways towards the valorisation of the individual teacher-self in the teaching process. Finally, the study foregrounded the potential of meditation and mindfulness as important means in the development of compassion, empathy and overall well-being. The study enabled us to position meditation and mindfulness in a more practical dimension. Given the strategic position of the institution we operate within, the findings have the potential to inform the practice of teacher education, teaching, and tertiary curriculum development in terms of incorporating meditation as a contemplative practice in teacher education programmes and policy. This study also contributed to the theoretical conceptualisation of holistic education by taking into consideration elements of meditation in relation to a conception of communication whereby speakers can have recourse to meditative practices as constitutive of the pragmatic processes of reflective, mindful communication.
BIBLIOGRAPHY