ENVISION: Music, Mindfulness and Creativity: Keys to Wellbeing & High Performance in Our Schools

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Mindfulness (Kind of!)

When those who practice Mindfulness speak of the practice, they most always mention meditation. The folks who belong to your school may or may not be comfortable with that concept. So, our treatment here will focus on mindfulness as paying attention “on purpose”.

Mindfulness involves a conscious direction of our awareness. Not that the two terms are interchangeable. For instance, I may be aware I’m irritable, but that wouldn’t mean I was being mindful of my irritability. In order to be mindful I have to be purposefully aware of myself, not just vaguely and habitually aware. Knowing that you are eating is not the same as eating mindfully.

This purposefulness is a very important part of mindfulness. Having the purpose of staying with our experience, whether that’s the breath, or a particular emotion, or something as simple as eating, means that we are actively shaping the mind.

Students’ anxiety and stress can interfere with the learning process at every step of the way. They may be dwelling in the past (which no longer exists) or fantasizing about the future. Mindfulness helps students realize that the one moment we actually can experience — the present moment — is the one we seem most to avoid.

So in mindfulness we’re concerned with noticing what’s going on right now. (Like your lesson!) That doesn’t mean we can no longer think about the past or future, but when we do so we do so mindfully, so that we’re aware that right now we’re thinking about the past or future.

By purposefully directing our awareness away from such thoughts and towards the “anchor” or our present moment experience, we teach students the skill of getting into an alpha state. Alpha is the state of relaxed concentration. Research shows that when students are in an alpha state they learn faster (Loznov 1966) and remember information longer (Schuster, Grillon 1986).
Self-control is a strong indicator of future success, regardless of intelligence or social status.

Children who displayed greater levels of self-control were more likely to have better health, greater financial success and more.

Everyone could benefit from improving self-control, not just at-risk groups.

Children with lower self-control scores, the researchers found, were more likely to have a number of physical health problems including sexually transmitted infections, weight issues, and high blood pressure. They were also more likely to be dependent on drugs; to have worse financial planning and money management skills; to be raising a child in a single-parent household; and to have a criminal record.

Supporting and Fostering Executive Functioning in Students

Lay out expectations
Motivation = Expected results

Develop emotional voice
Students need to learn words for their feelings. Students who can articulate their feelings have less outbursts.

Model self-control
Children learn what they see, not what we tell them. Be transparent about the strategies you use to calm down (deactivate) or problem solve when you are in a frustrating situation.

Take a break
Recognize acceleration patterns in students and encourage them to take a break before they “go over the edge”. We will share many brief strategies today. (Mindfulness strategies)

Reinforce the positive
Too often, good behavior goes unrecognized because that is how they are supposed to behave. Take a moment and let individual students know you appreciate their efforts in demonstrating self-control and tie it into values.

Be consistent - follow through
In a follow up study to Mischel's Marshmallow Test, Researchers at the University of Rochester found that students’ ability to delay gratification had a lot to do with the behavioral clues around them. They concluded that if a child or adult lives in an environment where promises always get broken and outcomes are unreliable, the most rational response is to eat the marshmallow right in front of her — and not wait for the promised marshmallows of the future.

Teach strategies that strengthen the PreFrontal Cortex
Excerpts from various publications: (because Gray Matter Matters!)

From NIH: Meta-Analysis — Mindful-based Interventions in School

School appears to be an appropriate setting for such interventions, since children spend a lot of time there and interventions can be brought directly to groups of children in areas of need as part of a preventive approach at little cost (Weare and Nind, 2011). Mindfulness can be understood as the foundation and basic pre-condition for education. Children need to learn to stop their mind wandering and regulate attention and emotions, to deal with feelings of frustration, and to self-motivate. Mindfulness practice enhances the very qualities and goals of education in the 21st century. These qualities include not only attentional and emotional self-regulation, but also prosocial dispositions such as empathy and compassion, self-representations, ethical sensitivity, creativity, and problem solving skills. They enable children to deal with future challenges of the rapidly changing world, ideally becoming smart, caring, and committed citizens (Shapiro et al., 2008; Mind and Life Education Research Network (MLERN), 2012).
http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4075476/

NYT: Is School Making our Kids Sick?:

Dr. Slavin seemed unprepared for the results of testing he did in cooperation with Irvington High School in Fremont, Calif., a once-working-class city that is increasingly in Silicon Valley’s orbit. He had anonymously surveyed two-thirds of Irvington’s 2,100 students last spring, using two standard measures, the Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale and the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory. The results were stunning: 54 percent of students showed moderate to severe symptoms of depression. More alarming, 80 percent suffered moderate to severe symptoms of anxiety.
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/opinion/sunday/is-the-drive-for-success-making-our-children-sick.html

NYT: Art of Serendipity — Awareness/observation skills as creativity:

Dr. Erdelez sees serendipity as something people do. In the mid-1990s, she began a study of about 100 people to find out how they created their own serendipity, or failed to do so. Her qualitative data — from surveys and interviews — showed that the subjects fell into three distinct groups. Some she called “non-encounterers”; they saw through a tight focus, a kind of chink hole, and they tended to stick to their to-do lists when searching for information rather than wandering off into the margins. Other people were “occasional encounterers,” who stumbled into moments of serendipity now and then. Most interesting were the “super-encounterers,” who reported that happy surprises popped up wherever they looked.
http://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/03/opinion/how-to-cultivate-the-art-of-serendipity.html
The idea that we could all benefit from meditation in our busy, stressful lives is relatively commonplace. It’s claimed that meditation can improve concentration, promote relaxation, invigorate and energise us, and increase our overall well-being. Which all sounds great. But to the uninitiated, there is a bewildering assortment of different meditation practices, some religious and some secular, which can make choosing between them a challenge. One form of meditation practice – mindfulness – has recently come under the critical gaze of scientific study, and as a result is now promoted by numerous medical centres for its health benefits, and some enlightened educational establishments for its cognitive gains.

Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), developed by Jon Kabat-Zinn, refers to a particular type of meditation practice that cultivates “a moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness”. We have probably all experienced driving home on autopilot, or mindlessly eating dinner while watching TV, without really noticing anything about the roads or the food along the way – the exact opposite of mindfulness. We are essentially absent in our own lives, failing to notice the experiences as they occur. Put simply, mindfulness is a way of paying attention. For example, focusing on just the breath (on each of the separate sensations in your nose, throat, lungs, ribs, diaphragm, shoulders, etc.) is a powerful method for tuning into the present experience of the body while maintaining a relaxed state of mind, and is one of the central meditations in mindfulness practice.

Perhaps surprisingly for something so apparently simple, there is now considerable evidence that mindfulness practice can help with both physical and mental health. It can reduce persistent pain, alleviate stress, anxiety and depression, and help manage chronic disease [1]. There is also growing evidence that mindfulness meditation improves cognition and memory. Zeidan and colleagues [2] found that even “brief mindfulness training significantly improved visuo-spatial processing, working memory, and executive functioning” and enhanced sustained attention. Neuroimaging studies indicate that MBSR is associated with increased grey matter in brain regions involved in
learning and memory processes, emotional regulation and self-referential processing [3].

How does mindfulness apply to music? Although to date there has been little formal study of mindfulness and music, the two are natural partners. Musicians spend unusually large amounts of time alone practising, in a state of what pianist-composer Rolf Hind calls “solitary absorption”.

**Mindfulness can make practice more effective by improving mental focus.** There should be no mindless practice! The BulletProofMusician has a great blog about mindful practising, which highlights particularly its efficiency gains. People have also reported that mindfulness meditation heightens “their listening experience by increasing their ability to focus on the music without distraction” [4]. As Hind observes in his article in the *Guardian*, “you would be surprised what an ecstatic cacophony emerges from your mind when there’s nothing around to distract it”.

**Mindfulness can also help reduce performance anxiety,** both before going on stage and during the performance itself, by giving the performer a way of managing their nerves. Given his own experience with meditation, Hind introduced a custom designed MBSR-based course to music students at the London Guildhall School of Music and Drama, which was very positively received.

It seems likely that mindfulness is also directly relevant to musical memory, both for encoding and retrieval of information from long term memory as well as improving working memory. Retrieval cues – snippets of information that allow access to memory – form part of a standard explanation for recall of information from long term memory and have explicitly been linked to expert musical memory. They can be likened to a kind of mental Google for memories. And like searching in Google, some cues are better search terms than others. Importantly, more accessible memories have a higher activation level, and **retrieval is less effective if cues are not attended to.** For a cue to be effective it should be purposely encoded at the same time as the memory itself. Therefore, mindful practising that purposely focuses on specific retrieval cues will ensure that the cues are consciously formed and reinforced.

A few years ago, in an attempt to control overwhelming performance anxiety prior to undertaking my first piano diploma, I attended a 12-week MBSR course. Although I can’t claim to be a
complete convert – I don’t meditate daily, though I probably should – I definitely benefited from the course and now always integrate short meditation sessions into my practice during the run-up to a concert. I’ve found that after meditating, I’m much more alert while playing; I’m able to notice when my mind wanders and bring it back quickly. As my teacher was fond of saying, **if you have a mind, it will wander because that’s what minds do.** And if a wandering mind can undermine a practice session, it can completely derail a performance! A sudden thought of “what shall I have for dinner?”, or “I must remember to call the dentist”, or (worst of all) “I can’t remember the next note” can be frighteningly disorientating. Constant micro-judgements about how to play each note, or how to shape each phrase, are crucial during practice but destabilise our ability to actually make music during a performance. **Control of attentional focus** is perhaps the major benefit of mindfulness in music, and is the key to conquering musical memory and delivering a great performance.

References:


3-2-1 Relax

1. State your goal in positives. See it, hear it, feel it.

2. Take three deep cleansing breaths, exhaling through your mouth, feeling any tension leaving with the out breath.

3. Fixate your eyes comfortably on a spot in front of you. At any time if you feel a need to close your eyes, you may do so.

4. Name 3 things you can SEE, in a slow and steady voice.

   Take a cleansing breath.

5. Name 3 things you can HEAR.

   Take a cleansing breath.

6. Name 3 things you can FEEL.

   Take a cleansing breath.

7. Now, repeat the process, this time naming 2 things you can see, hear and feel that you didn’t name before.

   Take a cleansing breath.

8. Repeat above, naming 1 thing each time.

   Take a cleansing breath.

9. Now, close you eyes and name one thing you can see, one thing you can hear, one thing you can feel. Focus on your breaths in and out to relax yourself even further. When you’re ready, you can reorient yourself, feeling refreshed, or you may allow yourself to drift off to sleep.
Bibliography and Recommended Reading


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Front Psychol. 2014; 5: 603. Published online 2014 Jun 30. doi: [10.3389/fpsyg.2014.00603](http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4075476/)


Using Meditation to Close the Achievement Gap (NYT): [http://tinyurl.com/hm4hx52](http://tinyurl.com/hm4hx52)


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