

Research Paper

Soulful Schooling: The Place of Meditation in Holistic Well-Being

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the impact of meditation on the holistic well-being of school students. A qualitative approach was adopted, involving interviews with 100 students to explore their experiences and perceptions of meditation practices. The findings indicate that meditation contributes significantly to social, emotional, and intellectual well-being, while also fostering a sound mind, inner peace, and balance in students' social interactions and academic performance. Reported benefits include enhanced concentration, emotional regulation, self-awareness, and improved peer relationships. The results suggest that meditation not only serves as a tool for stress reduction but also nurtures harmony in students' lives. These results highlight the potential of meditation as a pedagogical and developmental tool for cultivating holistic growth in young learners. The study emphasizes the need to integrate meditation into school education framework to nurture both academic success and soulful development.

Keywords: *Meditation, Student well-being, School education*

The survival of the human race depends at least as much on the cultivation of social and emotional intelligence as it does on the development of technological knowledge and skills. The need to refocus schools on the holistic development of children is profound. The “whole child” and “well-being” are objectives most parents favor for their children.

The concept of Meditation-

More and more people are opting for Meditation in today's chaotic and busy world. They seek peace of mind, search for truth, healing and release from anxiety and stress. And one could find teachers that are teaching 'time-tested' techniques of Meditation (Kondaveti & Jha, 2012). Meditation is called 'Dhyana' in Sanskrit. It comes from the root word 'dhyati' which means 'to meditate or contemplate'. The word 'Meditation' has been used to describe a variety of broadly similar practices and techniques designed to attain enlightenment. This word loosely describes a range of techniques and practices across various traditions and cultures. One universally widespread and accepted definition is that, meditation simply means a 'no thought state'. Maharishi Patanjali called this state as '*Chittavritti Nirodhak*'.

“When Meditation is mastered, the mind is unwavering like a flame of a lamp in a windless place.” – Bhagvad Gita

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“Meditation is the dissolution of thoughts in Eternal awareness or Pure consciousness without objectification, knowing without thinking, merging finitude in infinity.” – Swami Sivananda

The Soul: Our Eternal, Interdimensional Self

The soul is the unique core of our self and the consciousness of who we are. Soul is filled with creative possibilities to manifest itself. The word ‘Soul’ is used here to call for attention to the inner life; to the depth dimension of human experience; to students’ longings for something more than ordinary, material, and fragmented existence.

Meditation and mindfulness induce a heightened state of awareness and focused attention which help nourish the soul of practitioner. “Meditation is the tongue of the soul and the language of our spirit.” – Jeremy Taylor

When students in a group are able to acknowledge the truth, whether it is malevolent or benign, when they can meet where their personal stories strike universal chords, they become a community that can respond constructively to any challenge. This is the soul of education which needs to be nourished in school education system.

School Education

School education is here referred to as the formal schooling that involves instructions in educational institutions. It typically follows structured curriculum which comprise concepts, content, values and skills. Wide range of subjects are covered in school education and it helps lay foundation for future learning and development.

Objectives

The objectives of this research encompass delving into the findings of literature that shows the impact and outcomes of incorporating meditation on emotional and social well-being and academic achievement of school students, emphasizing on its impact on reduction in stress and anxiety leading to overall well-being of practitioners. Secondly, to present the results of primary data collected through interviews taken in-person for this research, and the article will conclude with pointing out policy consideration in Indian context and stating research findings with its educational implications to support the existing school education system bridging towards such teaching that is meaningful and education that contributes to the nourishment of souls of our children and world as a whole.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Impact and outcome of incorporating meditation (on various aspects):

Meditation and Social Well-Being

Social well-being is a state of an individual’s overall quality of life which encompasses happiness and satisfaction in context of their relationships and interaction with society. It also includes the emotional balance of an individual which tells how well he/she can manage his/her emotions, cope with stressful situations and overall mental health. Socially well individuals find connection and acceptance within social groups and community which provides them a sense of identity and support.

Social well-being of students is crucial for their overall development. It comprises of emotional management, communication skills, relationship management, responsible decision-making, empathy etc. Promoting these aspects can contribute to a more positive learning environment for students.

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For improvement of students' social behavior, emotional well-being and academic performance, it is important to provide them Social-Emotional Learning (SEL). One widely implemented school program, the Quiet Time Program, has been shown to improve factors associated with SEL, including positive emotional and behavioral coping skills, self-actualization and adaptability. Two groups of students participated in the study and experimental group practiced Transcendental Meditation (TM) being Quiet Time school. Social and emotional competencies were assessed by both teachers rated assessment and students' self-reported psychological distress. Assessments were based on standardized scales for reference. Results showed significant improvement in TM group compared to control group in social-emotional competencies for both the entire sample and high-risk subgroups. And a decrease in negative emotional symptoms was observed in high-risk TM group students compared to controls (Valosek et al. 2019).

Relaxation achieved through meditation can play a significant role in achieving psychological well-being for people. The number of symptoms experienced by patients with a wide range of disorders and illnesses can be reduced by regular meditation practice. Vijayaraghavan & Madhava Chandran (2019) studied students who attended a meditation class and continued meditation for 90 days. Results of the study highlighted that students experienced better well-being through meditation practice. Data was collected using a questionnaire on psychological well-being before and after meditation, quantified as the sum of scores of well-being parameters (OECD, 2024). Reduction in tension and relaxed state achieved through meditation exert more influence on well-being.

Meditation cultivates mindfulness, and mindfulness can be lived beyond meditation. There are many forms of meditation, mindfulness meditation practice is believed to lead to a felt sense of trust and closeness with others as well as an enhanced ability to approach stressful interpersonal events as challenges rather than threats (Kabat-Zinn, 1996). Mindfulness helps promote capacity to be a witness of one's thoughts and emotions. To avoid impulsive reactions and rather promote response than reply, mindfulness practice is beneficial (Kondaveti & Jha, 2012).

Today's world offers many challenges to teenagers that result in their poor mental health. The study conducted by Kanchibhotla et al., (2021) aimed at investigating benefits of a four-day meditation retreat on cognitive abilities, mental and emotional well-being of teenagers. Results of this study presented a fair demonstration of 33% increase in average accuracy in standardized tests on well-being of participants post intervention. It was concluded that a well-structured meditation retreat has considerable benefits on teenagers' mental well-being, emotional stability and cognitive capacity.

Themes described by students after the intervention of Transcendental Meditation studied by Rosaen and Benn (2006) included- an increased state of restful attention, improvement in academic performance, improvement in emotional skills (self-control, self-awareness and flexibility in emotional response). The inner state of restful alertness induced by meditation appeared central to facilitating growth in social and emotional capacities. Moreover, it provided students with greater capacity to expand their ways of looking inwardly at themselves and their relationship with other. Students also reported increased focus and attention on controlling their behavior and keeping on task in classroom. Participant gained better capacity of self-reflection and regulation of interpersonal stress.

Meditation and Stress & Anxiety

Academic stress is common in developing countries. Most of the students feel stress related to assignments, tests, examination and academic performance. Sometimes this stress can have positive effect on their performance but many times it causes negative effects on students' mental and psychological health and lead to problems like anxiety, phobia and depression. (Bleasdale et al. 2019). Students have many challenges during their academic journeys such as time management, social associations, setting priority for tasks, maintain harmonious relationships, health etc. which can disturb them and create difficulties in day-to-day situations. Nargundkar et al., (2020) conducted a survey on effects of various meditation interventions on overall performance of college students. Their survey studied many studies analyzing effects of meditation on parameters such as anxiety, stress and attention on various scales with the use of questionnaires and employing EEG to analyze the effects of different meditation types on overall performance of community of college students. This was a comprehensive survey which concluded that out of various forms of meditation techniques, mindfulness meditation and transcendental meditation observed to have profound effects on the mental as well as physical well-being of the participant students. This helped in significantly improving their efficiency as well as academic performance.

Students of teaching and counseling training programs are also exposed to relatively high levels of stress during their studies, and later during their work. In order to help their students in dealing with frustration and stress, they themselves are quite prone to it. Few programs at professional development level address this issue in their curricula. Mindfulness meditation practices can be successfully introduced into traditional academic settings as part of pre-service training curriculum. Tarrasch, R. (2015) finds out in a study that to enhance professional' personal mental health, mindfulness meditation helped. Trainees developed more compassion and receptive behavior towards their pupils. Outcomes of the study included a better awareness of thoughts and feelings, a perceived reduction in stress and a better sleep quality. Subjects of the study reported that they were able to transmit the benefits of meditation to their students as well.

A research team explored the impact of Quiet Time (QT) stress management program in one high-performing public high school in a large West Coast city. The school was known for its high academic standards and rigorous academic program. Students routinely take four, five or as many as seven Advanced Placement courses in any particular given year. Internalized pressure and stress at home and at school take a toll on students' mental and physical health (Denizet-Lewis, 2017). QT program was implemented and within first year of implementation, school students in a high-violence neighborhood experienced statistically significant reduction in stress and anxiety, a dramatic drop in suspensions and bullying, and an increase in self-esteem.

With the emergence of alternative medicine therapies as useful and effective therapeutic tool in conventional medicine, it has led to exploration of meditation for treating and managing a variety of illnesses. Meditation has been effective in decreasing both state anxiety (DeBerry et al, 1989) and trait anxiety (Goleman & Schwartz, 1976). Acceptance of this modality as treatment is growing as it is evidence-based and it has documented positive effects on stress, depression, anxiety etc. Students with learning disabilities (LD; defined by compromised academic performance) often have higher anxiety levels, school-related stress and less social skills compared to their peers. Beauchemin et al., (2008) conducted a pilot study using pre-post no-control design and examined the feasibility of, attitude towards, and impact of five-

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week intervention of mindfulness meditation on 34 LD diagnosed adolescents. Outcomes revealed decreased anxiety levels and enhanced social skills with improved performance in academics. Survey response overwhelmingly demonstrated positive attitudes towards program.

A study focused upon stress management on secondary school students through Pranayama and Meditation applied standardized tests of stress management and found that meditation has positive effects on managing stress level of participants. Meditation and pranayama are believed to be the easiest and cost-effective techniques that helps deal with stress and anxiety with no adverse effects on the individual. In addition to this, pranayama and meditation help individuals maintain a positive outlook in life. (Joshi et al. 2020).

Manju Gundumogula (2021) highlighted effects of meditation on secondary school students in India. Attention was given particularly to the factors like- attitude towards environment, personal development, level of school anxiety and academic performance. In addition to these, social change triggered by meditation was also examined. Experimental group practices Sahaj Yoga Meditation, one session of 45 minutes per day, six days per week, for six months. Statistical analysis revealed significant difference in experimental and control group in terms of levels of academic anxiety, academic performance and environmental attitudes. All changes were positive and indicated improvement.

Meditation and Teachers' Anxiety

Gundumogula and Prusty (2019) studied the impact of meditation on state trait anxiety of teachers. Since teachers face rising pressure in their job, students get more and more demanding and challenging for the teachers, their anxiety levels are subject to increase. The study aimed to find difference in levels of anxiety between teachers that practice meditation and those who do not. State Trait Anxiety Test was used to collect data. The statistical analysis shows that there exists significant difference. The anxiety levels among non-meditative teachers were higher than meditative teachers. It was concluded that Sahaja Yoga Meditation practice helps teachers to overcome their anxiety levels and thus this technique can be used as a therapeutic technique for teachers in order to keep their mental health peaceful and balanced.

Meditation and Cognitive Ability

For better academic performance and success in scholastic and co-scholastic areas, students perform many cognitive tasks i.e., learning, paying attention, memorizing, thinking, problem solving, decision making, etc. all these tasks are directly related to cognitive abilities of children. Proper mind-body training should be provided to children so that these cognitive abilities could be enhanced. There is a growing interest of researchers and educators to blend meditation and other contemplative practices in educational processes for the benefits that meditation may provide to students as well as teachers and many studies have found that it is appropriate to integrate simple meditation practices like mindfulness, attention practices in education can be beneficial for students' physical and mental growth (Shapiro et al. 2011). Family expectations, pressure at school and opting for a suitable career are some keynote points where students put themselves under stress and tension. Meditation, its preachers and practitioners claim, can bestow positive qualities on the individuals and reduce negative ones.

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“As gold purified in a furnace loses its impurities and achieves its own true nature, the mind gets rid of the impurities of the attributes of delusion, passion and purity through Meditation and attains Reality.” – Adi Sankaracharya

Meditation is preached to foster spirituality, learning, peace, happiness and health among people. In the field of learning, focused attention bears great significance. The results of a study conducted by Namita Kumari Das (2019), strongly suggest that the practice of meditation improves memory of adolescent high school students and helps in improving attention span and academic achievement. This study found positive effects of meditation on academic achievement and psychological well-being of students. Similar results were found by Sharma et al., (2022) in their study focusing on impact of meditation on mental & physical health and thereby on academic performance of students. This study considered students of higher educational institutions located in Uttarakhand, India. Results and findings gave a conclusion that meditation does have an impact not only on mental and emotional well-being but it also helps improve physical and psychological health of students. Following meditation and mindfulness activities lead to improved confidence levels, concentration levels, focus, memory power and similar related aspects. Participant students also reported reduction in stress and boost in creativity and physical stamina.

“To the mind that is still, the whole universe surrenders.” – Lao Tzu. Still and calm mind is more receptive to new knowledge as it enhances attention spans. Rani and Rao (2000), while studying effects of meditation on attention processes studied the effects of transcendental meditation technique on various attributes of attention process. They attempted to study whether the effects were short term or long term. Studying a group of 100 college students, 50 students as experimental group and 50 students as control group, they applied Star Counting Test which showed that those who meditated regularly were more attentive as compared to the control group participants. After applying a number of tests, they concluded that regular practice of meditation techniques improves attention, a shift that appears to be permanent in some processes and temporary in others.

Kam-Tim So and David W Orme-Johnson (2001) found that the regular practice of Transcendental Meditation (TM) technique improved cognitive ability in high school students in Taiwan. Three studies were conducted on 362 high school students at three different schools. They practiced TM technique for 15-20 minutes twice a day for 6 to 12 months.

All findings and conclusions stated above give a fair view of positive outcomes and lasting impact of practicing meditation techniques. Further, to test the significance one of the meditation techniques, primary data was collected and presented with interpretation in following part.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study uses a descriptive research design. It employs a structured interview schedule to gather data on impact of meditation among secondary and senior secondary school students.

Population and Sample

The population consists of students studying in secondary and senior-secondary classes across different government schools. A sample of 100 students was chosen by convenience sampling.

Data Collection

A structured interview schedule was created to collect required data. It has three sections: Demographic details (gender, age, class, school), Detailed information on meditation practice, and its benefits in different facets of life.

Students were invited to participate voluntarily. The interview was conducted face-to-face.

Interpretation of primary data collected from interview (in-person)-

The interview schedule questions inquired the effectiveness of meditation in improving the social, emotional and academic well-being of practitioners. The interview was conducted on 100 students, all of them studying in government schools in secondary and senior secondary classes. Interview was held in-person and responses were recorded after conversation with each and every participant.

The analysis and interpretation of each dimension of interview is done below-

Why meditation?

The responses were analyzed and it can be said that respondents were facing some challenges like-

- Difficulty in studies
- Lack of social skills and absence of peers/friends
- Poor family relations
- Constant tussle with siblings
- Lack of confidence
- Not being able to find connection in society
- Lack of joy and meaning of life

Student respondents received advise to practice Breath Mindfulness Meditation as that would help them deal with and manage these challenges. It can be inferred that since all students were having some of these listed issues, they agreed on trying to practice meditation with a hope to better the prevailing situation.

Consistent Practice of Meditation?

Responses describe that every participant respondent started their meditation journey at different points in time. But all of them are a regular practitioner now. Their experience in this journey ranges from 8 months to 12 months.

It was found that irrespective of the point in time they began, they are regular for more than 6 months. They visit a nearby meditation center for regular meditation sessions and practice at their respective homes as well. All respondents practice Breath Mindfulness Meditation. This form of meditation helps in essentially quieting the mind with inhaling and exhaling and deals specifically with the development of mindfulness of breathing.

Behavior Modification after meditation practice?

The respondents noticed improved behavior patterns. Majority of responses underscore listed modifications in their prevailing behavior-

- Being more receptive among class group
- Positive outlook towards class mates
- Being able to make friends
- Better management of learning challenges
- Improvement in family relations, especially with siblings

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- Considerable reduction in anger and frustration
- Being able to feel joyful and accepted in society
- Awareness of self and readiness for positive changes

All students shared their personal experiences where they were able to distinguish between their previous self and the improved behavior that had led to their happiness and joy. Respondents narrated the noticed changes with much cheerfulness and gratitude that they could achieve such a state which earlier was not a case with them. It can be interpreted that meditation practice was very effective in bringing social and emotional stability in practitioners. Building up of confidence and harmony was also reported. One common statement that highlighted in all the responses was that all students shared their experiences with their class mates/friends and motivated them to practice meditation as well. Many of them now sit for group meditation during lunch break in schools. The family situations were also improving and students could bring more respect and understanding in relations. Students shared that they feel belonged to society now and they feel happy to be associated with their neighborhood and colony as the whole environment near their houses is better than before.

Any improvement in intellectual well-being/academic performance?

It was reported that regular meditation has helped students to develop better concentration in studies. The time duration allotted to study has also increased and they have stopped hating subjects. Also, they have been able to demonstrate improvement in their academic achievement. Students were enthused to tell that they have developed the abilities of intuition, where their inner voice guides them as to which question or concept is important for the examinations' point of view and they could test the truthfulness and authenticity of their intuition in their exams. Every participant mentioned experiencing improved levels of understanding for subjects that were earlier beyond their reach.

Majority of the students were below average learners and a few appeared for compartment exams to clear the required passing marks for promotion to next grade. After practicing meditation regularly for considerable amount of time, they felt increased interest in academics and are now a regular student in school with their home assignments in good shape considered earlier state. Some students mentioned being appreciated at school for participation in class activities and for improvement in test scores.

Development of personality as a whole?

Responses show that students have consciously developed positive outlook towards the society they live in and feel welcomed in schools and among friends. Moreover, some common experiences highlight that-

- Students have started taking initiative both at school and societal level in organizing events and activities
- They have developed harmony for themselves in their thoughts and feelings
- Respondents have started being more vocal and expressive of their ideas
- Society (especially neighborhood) is welcoming these changes in students' behavior
- Meditation experiences have created a sense of self-love, compassion and meaning and purpose of their lives
- Students have felt strong waves of happiness, joy and contentment while meditating and they could maintain that state for longer duration even after meditation
- Their personality is improving and they can experience more respect, generating from their inside, towards plants, animals and all beings.

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It can be interpreted that both apparent changes and felt changes are commendable and these responses are evidence that students have experienced quite memorable and interesting modifications in their overall personality and they have been able to bridge the gaps in their lives with the help of regular practice of meditation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The significance of this portion is to provide a concise and holistic picture of the research that has been undertaken. Here, different dimensions of the research process have been assimilated and the resultant findings leading to the conclusions are being presented. It is the culmination of the research effort and involves a recapitulation.

In this research paper, the findings of first-hand experiences of meditation practitioners are presented, all being secondary and senior secondary students enrolled in government schools located in Delhi region. This research was done to find out if there exist some connection between meditation and emotional/social and intellectual well-being of students. Findings suggest that meditation has proved to be beneficial in many aspects-

- Improving social skills of students
- Developing sense of belongingness
- Better academic achievement
- Amending relations
- Enhance positivity and satisfaction in life
- Upgrade overall personality

With these findings, it can be suggested that formal school education system should incorporate meditation as an activity in daily routine.

Policy Consideration

As stated in Happiness Curriculum Framework, 2019, the schools in India need to implement a curriculum which not only promotes development in cognition, language, literacy, numeracy and the arts but also addresses wellbeing and happiness of the students. Thus, a combination of building capabilities in scholastic areas of literacy, Math, Science and other subjects with huge emphasis on co-scholastic skills of mindfulness, self-awareness, critical thinking, reflection & inner stability seem to be the need of the hour. Against this backdrop, the need to raise and prepare future citizens who are mindful, aware, awakened, empathetic, firmly rooted in their identity with wings that can help them thrive in this uncertain world seems to be necessary, now more than ever before.

Education has a larger purpose to serve and hence, it cannot be seen in isolation from the dire needs of today's society. Educators and schools across the globe are realizing the need for a wellness lesson for school children. If we don't cultivate the inner life of adolescents as part of their search for goals or careers, they will likely make their decisions based on external pressures. Denied the guidance to penetrate beyond the surface, students can access only what is superficial and obvious.

The National Education Policy 2020 aims to set the basic guidelines for the Indian education system. Future generation of a nation is guided and influenced by the prevailing education system. When schools create the conditions for soulful communication between students and with caring adults, adolescents are less likely to fall prey to the damaging and potentially life-threatening "belonging" of the streets. The Happiness Curriculum is a similar endeavor to guide the attention of students towards exploring, experiencing and expressing happiness in not just the momentary but deeper and sustainable forms as well. This enables the learner

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to comprehend happiness within self, relationships and society. The society must be prepared and ready to face the coming challenges from upfront. This can be a paradigm shift where a learner moves from searching happiness externally from senses to be able to ensure it within oneself through Learning & Awareness and ensure continuity of values.

The students need to learn the techniques how to adjust and renew their knowledge and capacities and how to develop their potentials and well-being in the best way. Teachers, administrators, parents, and citizens who care about education have been working hard to reclaim the integrity of teaching and learning so that it can once again become a process in which the whole person is nourished.

CONCLUSION

In India, competition increases and become fierce in educational journey at a very young age. The ancient Indian Education System used meditation and yogic practices with the aim of promoting students' balance while supporting development of their full potential. If we are educating for wholeness, for citizenship, and for leadership in a democracy, *overall development belongs in schools*. Yoga and Meditation have become quite popular around the world in past fifty years. In India, Ministry of Health and Ministry of Science and Technology promote practices and research on these modalities.

This paper is an attempt to remember what we already know: The connection among souls is ultimately what education is about. There is no single right way to do it, no blueprint. But there are paths to the soul of students that are open to every teacher, in every classroom, in every school. All we need is the courage to walk these paths with our students. Once teachers have a framework for supporting the spiritual dimension of their students' growth, in terms of their social emotional and intellectual well-being, they can be remarkably inventive in developing new ways for doing so.

This paper offers a vision for meaning in education. The encouraging responses of meditation practitioners motivates us to incorporate such practice in every school and classroom. What will be required of us if we are to reclaim our humanity in 21st century life-empathy, compassion, love, gratitude, joy, happiness. This paper will help us to create new ideas for authentic education that can contribute to the healing of souls of our children and the nation as a whole.

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Conflict of Interest

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