



Mindful Empathy in Schools: A Pilot Program in Secondary Education in the Dominican Republic to promote Empathy and Socio-emotional Skills

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Resumen/Abstract

The overall objective has been to analyze the impact of a mindfulness-based program, Mind-Empathy in Schools (MEiS) on secondary school teachers and students in the Dominican Republic. Two different samples were used: Sample 1 (n=323 students: 127 participated in the experimental group and 196 in the control group, Mean age=17; 35% males and 65%, females); Sample 2 (n=109 teachers; 69 experimental group and 40 control group, Mean age=37. Male, 32.2% and 67.8%, female). The methodology was a cuasi-experimental design and a method of group comparison, with a control group and an experimental group, with pre-test and post-test measures. The following variables were evaluated through different scales: Empathy, Stress, Socioemotional Competences, Classroom climate and Academic Performance. All statistical analyses were performed through SPSS 24.0. The results show a significant improvement in the Experimental Group (Teachers and students). No changes were observed in the control group. Practical implications of the results are discussed.

Palabras claves/Key Words:

Mindfulness, Empathy, Socio-emotional skills, Secondary education, Students, Teachers.

Objetivos/Propósitos

General objective

To analyze the impact of a Mindfulness and education training program on the promotion of empathy and social-emotional competences, classroom climate and stress management in Dominican secondary school teachers and students.

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Specific objectives

- 1- To test the effect of a Mindfulness program called Mindful Empathy in Schools (MEiS) on the promotion of empathy and social-emotional competences of teachers and students.
- 2- To evaluate the effect of mindfulness on the stress management of teachers and students.
- 3- To determine the impact of mindfulness on classroom climate management.

Hypotheses

Based on the stated objectives we formulate the following hypotheses. After the 8-week psychoeducational intervention:

- 1- Empathy and socio-emotional competences will improve in both samples.
- 2- The level of stress in both pupils and teachers will decrease.
- 3- The classroom climate will improve significantly in the school.
- 4- Mindfulness will have a positive mediating effect on the study variables.
- 5- No improvements are expected in the control group.

Marco teórico

In today's over-stimulated adolescents, teaching mindfulness-based techniques to cultivate attention helps them to calm their minds, focus, and to improve their concentration.

Undoubtely, teachers play an important role in creating the emotional climate in the classroom that facilitates student learning and personal well-being. This climate is often affected by the work-related stress that can be present in any work institution, especially in those positions in which teachers work with a large number of people who have different interests and personalities, as is the case in the education sector in the Dominican Republic.

Although there is little research on the subject, this study shows evidence that teachers experience prolonged tension and stress, which, in turn, can lead to burnout. On the other hand, scientific research has shown that there is a strong relationship between social-emotional

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learning, cognitive development and academic performance (Bluth et al., 2015; López-González, Amutio, & Herrero, 2018).

In recent years, mindfulness techniques have been successfully incorporated to cope with chronic pain, alleviate psychological suffering or mitigate anxiety and depression. Brain changes produced by this type of practice have been identified, including increased activity of the left prefrontal cortex, which is associated with well-being and resilience (Davidson & Begley, 2012), or higher the concentration of grey matter in brain regions involved in processes related to memorization and learning, attention or emotional regulation (Hölzel et al. , 2011, García-Campayo, Demarzo, & Modrego, 2017).

Recently, a new program, "Mindful-Empathy in Schools", seeks to emphasize a training practice based on the cultivation of mindfulness to promote empathy as an emotional intelligence skill, combining other emotional regulation tools to manage difficult emotions and stress, fostering positive relationships between students and teachers.

Methodology/Metodología

[The research is framed on the basis of the quasi-experimental method of group comparison, with a control group and an experimental group, with pre-test and post-test measures, through an 8-week psychoeducational intervention.

Sample

Two different samples were used: Sample 1 (n=323 students: 127 participated in the experimental group and 196 in the control group, Mean age=17; 35% males and 65%, females), Sample 2 (n=109 teachers; 69 experimental group and 40 control group; Mean age=37. Male, 32.2% and 67.8%, female).

Instruments

The following variables were evaluated through different scales, including: Empathy, Stress, Socioemotional Competences, Classroom climate and Academic Performance.

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Data Analyses

All statistical analyses were performed through SPSS 24.0. Descriptive statistics on the data obtained; mean, standard deviation and percentages, correlations between variables were calculated, and internal consistency and reliability analyses were carried out.

A multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed. Statistical significance and effect sizes (η^2) were interpreted according to Cohen's criteria: between .01 and .04 were considered small, between .05 and .14 medium, and above .14 a large effect (Cohen, 1988). Several linear regression analyses were conducted in order to study the effect of the Mindfulness program on emotional competencies and Empathy, classroom climate and stress.

Finally, a mediation analysis was conducted through the SPSS macro process (Hayes, 2013) to analyze the mediating effect of Mindfulness on the relationship between the study variables, and to calculate the total and direct effects of the independent variable on the dependent variables.

Results/Resultados

The results showed a significant improvement ($p < 0.005$) in the Experimental Group of students (Table 1) in Mindfulness (MAAS; $p = 0.001$, Classroom Climate (EBCC; $p = 0.002$, social-emotional competences (BarOnICE; $p = 0.001$), and Empathy (TECA; $p = 0.001$). As for teachers, the results showed a significant change in all the variables: Mindfulness (FFMQ; $p = 0.001$, Stress Management (ED-6; $p = 0.002$ Socioemotional Competences (ECSD; $p = 0.002$, Classroom Climate (EBCC; $p = 0.001$, and Empathy (IRI; $p = 0.001$) (Table 2).

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Tabla 1. Means, Standard Deviations and t-tests for the control and experimental groups (**Students**)

	PRETEST		POSTEST		t	p
	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental		
Variables	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
MAAS	55,5 (2,3)	59,1 (3,5)	55,4 (12,3)	65,6 (12,3)	-9.66	.001*
TECA	22,6 (4,4)	22,3 (2,1)	22,6 (4,4)	23,1 (3,9)	-4.22	.001*
EBCC	15,6 (2,6)	16,0 (2,5)	15,2 (2,5)	17,1 (2,2)	-7.39	.002* *
PSS	10,8 (4,0)	11,0 (4,3)	11,2 (3,6)	10,5 (3,6)	-	-
BarOnICE	30,8 (6,1)	30,6 (5,3)	31,1(6,0)	34,3 (3,4)	-11.33	.001*

Note. *p = .001; **p < .005

Table 2. Means, Standard Deviations and t-tests for the control and experimental groups (**Teachers**)

	PRETEST		POSTEST		t	p
	Control	Experimental	Control	Experimental		
Variables	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
FFMQ	26,17 (7,9)	24,3 (3,8)	25,57 (4,9)	32,4 (5,5)	-18.84	.001*
IRI	17,47 (4,5)	12,6 (3,3)	17,0 (4,1)	13,6 (3,9)	-6.0	.001*
ECSD	20,97 (3,6)	17,6 (1,8)	20,90 (3,6)	21,7 (2,3)	-26.52	.002*
ED-6	22,65 (3,2)	21,2 (2,3)	22,65 (4,5)	24,2 (2,7)	-23.68	.002*
EBCC	17,7 (1,8)	14,5 (1,2)	16,05 (1,8)	17,8 (2,0)	-19.58	.001*

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Discussion and Conclusions

As observed in the results prior to the research, the data are consistent with the findings found in other studies that demonstrate the benefits of mindfulness related to health, psychological well-being, social competences or academic performance in children and adolescents (Bluth et al., 2015; López-González, Amutio, & Herrero, 2018). In addition to its positive impact on stress, emotional regulation, prosocial behaviour and school violence (i.e., bullying), and self-compassion (Frank et al., 2015; Pizarro et al., 2019), the usefulness of the application of relaxation, meditation and mindfulness techniques at school is demonstrated, in order to learn relaxation and thus activate the internal resources of students (Amutio et al., 2015; Calvo, Betancort, & Díaz, 2009; Delgado et al., 2010; Franco, 2009b; Kaspereen, 2012; López-González, Amutio, & Herrero, 2018; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010), improve attention and emotional regulation (Hölzel et al., 2011, García-Campayo, Demarzo, & Modrego, 2017).

Although in the school setting there are few findings on the subject in relation to teachers, different research has shown that a psycho-educational program based on Mindfulness improves self-awareness and the capacity for emotional self-regulation, being effective in preventing and reducing burnout, strengthening relationships with patients and inducing positive changes in self-care (Asuero, 2012; Amutio et al. 2015).]

Therefore, in light of these results, it can be concluded that the mindfulness intervention Mindful Empathy in Schools is useful and effective when carrying out a psychoeducational intervention aimed at improving the levels of Empathy, Social Emotional Competences, Emotional Regulation and Classroom Climate in students and teachers in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic.

The results of this pilot study are related to those found in other studies based on mindfulness that also proved to be effective on the emotional state in students, social competences or academic performance of children and adolescents (Bluth et al., 2015; López-González, Amutio, & Herrero, 2018).

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Scientific and Educational Contributions/Contribuciones y significación científica de este trabajo

The Mindful Empathy in Schools (MEiS) program has emerged as an innovative psycho-pedagogical resource to respond to current needs for students in the classroom. It is also an effective tool for teachers, as research shows that teaching is traditionally considered one of the most stressful professions (Golg & Roth, 1993). At the same time, this research represents a way to foster better student-teacher relationships and improving classroom climate, well-being and quality of life. To date this is one of the few programs that is directed towards teachers and students.

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