

The Perceived Effectiveness of Using Mindfulness as a Strategy for Special Educators in Coping with the Stress of their Work Environment

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Abstract

The present study focused on the perceived effectiveness of using mindfulness as a stress-reduction technique among special educators. Studies have shown more focus on using mindfulness with students, versus mindfulness for personal use by educators. Yet, teachers of children with special needs face unique social-emotional challenges in carrying out their roles and their well-being can be compromised as a result. This increased level of stress can lead to job burnout, evidenced by the high attrition rate of special educators. For this study, a quantitative survey was constructed, and then answered completely online and anonymously by special educators and educators in inclusive settings. The results showed that most participants agreed special educators have a high level of stress in their working environment, and that this stress can lead to job burnout. Additionally, over three-quarters of respondents felt mindfulness could help decrease the stress of the work environment yet only one-quarter of respondents stated they had been trained for both mindfulness in the classroom and personal use. Despite any limitations, the results indicate implementing a mindfulness practice among special educators would be a welcome and beneficial method for decreasing the stress and increasing the well-being of these important educators.

Keywords: special education, mindfulness, perception

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Presently, mindfulness is a mainstream phenomenon in education, being implemented as a tool to assist our K-12 students in both public and private schools. While there are numerous curricula developed for classroom implementation, far less emphasis is placed upon training those who will be teaching this material to the students (Thomas, 2015, p. 120). Compounding the situation, teachers of children with special needs face unique social-emotional challenges in carrying out their roles. As a result, the health and well-being of these individuals is often compromised, specifically, regarding their increased stress levels. Mindfulness has been shown to decrease stress levels in individuals (Brown, Ryan, 2003, p. 843; Harker, Pidgeon, Klaassen, & King, 2016, p. 632; Jennings, Frank, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2013), yet the effectiveness of such methods may hinge upon the user's perception of the technique. The aim of this current research was to gauge the perceived effectiveness of decreasing the stress levels and increasing the well-being of special educators by using mindfulness. Directly related, participants also stated whether they believed stress levels of special educators are, in fact, high, and whether this could lead to job burnout. Ultimately, the high attrition rates of special educators were a clear marker of professional concern, and many studies have shown stress as one of the main causes of burnout (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Jennings, et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings., 2012).

To answer the question of this study, a survey was administered to special educators, within the United States, asking them to provide their thoughts about and experiences with mindfulness. More specifically, participants provided their perceptions about mindfulness and its effectiveness as a strategy for decreasing stress and increasing the well-being in the lives of special educators, both in and out of the classroom. Additional questions were asked of participants regarding any pre-service or in-service mindfulness trainings they may have experienced and their overall feelings about such trainings.

The participants were special educators (in various settings) or general educators in inclusion classes. These educators were selected based on the criteria that they work directly with students with special needs, on an instructional level.

Literature Review

Mindfulness

Mindfulness was originally found in the teachings of Buddhism where it was considered a “path to enlightenment” and not psychological in nature. In 1979, Jon Kabat-Zinn brought mindfulness to the forefront in America when he founded the Stress Reduction Clinic at the University of Massachusetts Medical School, where he eventually re-termed the approach “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction” (MBSR). At this time, the religious connection and framework to mindfulness was removed and MBSR became a scientific and psychological approach to stress reduction. Often called the Father of Mindfulness, Kabat-Zinn’s operational definition of mindfulness is “being present and cultivating moment-to-moment non-judgmental awareness” (Rechtschaffen, 2014, p. xix). He lists numerous benefits to the individual including reduced stress, lowered blood pressure, improved memory, and decreased incidence of depression and anxiety (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). It is this facet of mindfulness that this research study aims to expand upon - specifically the stress-reduction capabilities – to measure current perceptions of its effectiveness among special educators.

Numerous study results have shown the positive effects of mindfulness, including mindfulness being associated with greater well-being (Alahari, 2017; Brown, Ryan, 2003, p. 832; Harker et al., 2016, p. 632; Jennings et al., 2013) and emotional regulation (Lutz et al., 2013). These studies specifically gauged the effectiveness of mindfulness as a psychological well-being enhancer, on multiple levels.

Mindfulness, in general, and its beneficial effects across the board have been researched at ever increasing rates throughout the past twenty years, when you look at the number of related research articles since 2000. As stated by Greg Flaxman and Lisa Flook, Ph.D. from UCLA’s Mindful Awareness Research Center, “Researchers’ interest in mindfulness practice has steadily increased as studies continue to reveal its beneficial effects” (n.d., p. 1). The directly correlated increase in research on mindfulness with educators’ use of mindfulness is raising questions by some researchers regarding the effectiveness of evidence-based studies on mindfulness. In 2015, Kelly Thomas found there to be a lack of research *about* educator mindfulness, compared to the *use* of mindfulness by educators. Additionally, she found there to be significantly more research on teaching mindfulness to the students, versus the teachers (p. 120). In 2012, a study was completed that delivered a five-week mindfulness training course to parents and teachers of children with special needs. Roeser et al. performed this research as their study

claimed that, “No rigorous studies have assessed whether mindfulness training (MT) might be an effective strategy to reduce stress and cultivate well-being and positive caregiving in these adults” (2012, p. 1). Yet, in 2017, a review was completed that questioned whether mindfulness research methodology was effective and improving over time. The studies that fit their criteria for review were randomized clinical trials of mindfulness-based interventions (Goldberg et al., 2017). Also, in 2017, Emerson et al. conclude a “current lack of convincing evidence of the positive effects of teacher MBIs {(Mindfulness Based Interventions)} on teaching and pupil outcomes...” (p. 1147). Other recent studies critically evaluated current and past research covering meditation and mindfulness, showing concern regarding lack of evidence and proper research practices, indirectly supporting Goldberg’s stated concerns (Creswell, 2017, p. 508; Van Dam et al., 2017). The above studies show a concern among researchers as to whether there is an evidence-based method to determine the effectiveness of mindfulness trainings and use. As an aside, this research project will be based on the educators’ perception of mindfulness’ effectiveness and will not be using clinical or experimental methods.

In addition to these studies questioning the research on the effectiveness of mindfulness trainings, an area of interest is whether mindfulness is just a passing fad or trend that takes the place of medical interventions. In, *Mind the Hype: A Critical Evaluation and Prescriptive Agenda for Research on Mindfulness and Meditation*, Van Dam et al. argue that current studies may be giving the public misinformation, which can lead them to be misled and disappointed (2017). A negative perception of mindfulness-based practices and trainings among special educators may be linked to such misinformation and lack of evidence, even though the potential for effectiveness may exist.

Special Educators and Stress

Job burnout and its subsequent attrition rate are a significant problem within the special education field as, “Approximately 13% of special education teachers leave the workforce every year (Cook & Boe, 2007, as cited in Garwood, Werts, Varghese, & Gosey, 2018, p. 31). While there are discrepancies regarding the exact numbers, attrition rates of special educators are considerably high. There are many factors at play in the dropout rate of special educators and the field of special education is fraught with challenges, both traceable and not. A study by Reed on special educators’ perspectives on burnout within their profession stated overwhelming paperwork as the leading cause, followed by lack of support, curriculum challenges, behavior challenges and parent involvement (2016). Additionally, without an increased self-awareness in the special education classroom, teachers can internalize students’ struggles and carry that weight (Garwood et al., 2018, p. 39). “It was emotionally exhausting for some teachers to strive continuously to help students and see little success” (Garwood et al., 2018, pg. 37). The large amount of input when working with students in special education can sometimes lead to frustration due to a lack of evidence of student growth. A 2016 study by Harker et al. found the following:

In addition to individual effects on mental health and psychological well-being, the organizational consequences of burnout among human service professionals include; increased turnover and absenteeism, unproductive work behaviors, and reduced job-satisfaction. However, these negative outcomes not only effect the organization but also affect the human service professional’s ability to effectively care for others....increased mindfulness has been shown to be correlated positively with several aspects of

psychological well-being, and negatively associated with burnout and secondary traumatic stress (p. 632).

There is emerging literature that demonstrates the beneficial effects of mindfulness against educator burnout. One study found that teachers' practice of mindfulness was negatively associated with emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and perceptions of low accomplishment (Abenavoli, Jennings, Greenberg, Harris, & Katz, 2013), which are key components of burnout. Other recent studies agree with the use of mindfulness for self-care to assist educators in effectively dealing with their professional stress and, therefore, decrease burnout (Flook et al., 2013; Jennings, et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2012). Additionally, in 2017, a study by Lopez stated that, "Educators' mindfulness is one aspect of social-emotional competence that may protect them from experiencing burnout and its negative consequences" (p. 4).

This self-care by educators may prove to be an obstacle, as many may feel their busy professional schedule does not allow time to learn or use mindfulness. In such a case, Carter (2015) states strategies, based in neuroscience, that can assist in reducing the perception of busyness to allow for a foundational mindfulness practice. She states that even small doses of consistent self-care activities can help decrease the detrimental effects of stress (Carter, 2015). However, it is not certain whether special educators will accept mindfulness as an effective method of stress reduction and whether this attitude or perception could in fact alter the effectiveness of any mindfulness-based trainings. Special educators must recognize how stress affects them, for them to buy-in to any type of mindfulness or stress-reduction strategy for self-care. Set or stalled perceptions and mindsets can potentially lead to conflict and professional burnout, especially in the constantly progressing field of education. The educators' chosen perceptions can either help or hinder the way that individual takes care of their mental and physical health. As stated by Hassed and Chambers (2014), "the term meditation can evoke attitudes, assumptions, and stereotypical notions" (p. 6), which may decrease any potential effectiveness of such training.

Even with a potential bias against or hesitation towards mindfulness, a general self-awareness regarding your mental state and well-being should be in place for self-preservation and prevention of occupational burnout. Brunsting, Sreckovic, and Lane discussed the need for an awareness to be present regarding potential burnout among special educators. They stated, "There is no quantitative evidence to support the adage knowing is half the battle when it comes to burnout. However, SET [special education teacher] awareness of the risks of burnout to themselves and other practitioners working in special education, especially those working with students with ED or ASD, is an important prerequisite to mitigating the impact of burnout" (2013, p. 702).

Pre-Service Teacher Training

Fives, Hamman & Olivarez give evidence that pre-service special educators can begin burning out during the student teaching experience (2007). Therefore, it stands that implementing an intervention of tools during pre-service training would benefit the future educators by alleviating this risk of burnout. "By nature of the students they serve, special education teachers have taken on a challenge" (Garwood et al., 2018, p. 39).

In, *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students*, Rechtschaffen speaks of giving pre-service teachers the skills of a mindfulness practice early on, allowing them to then share that practice with their classroom students (2014). As the old airline adage goes, “Put on your own oxygen mask first, before you assist others”. This rings especially true in the field of education.

Other recent studies showed potential benefits of using mindfulness with graduate students in the field of education. Hartigan’s study of pre-service teacher candidates reported “changes in their own level of stress and demeanor because of mindfulness and MBSR daily practice, both in their personal and professional lives” (2017, p. 157). Similarly, in 2015, Tarrasch performed a qualitative analysis on mindfulness meditation training for graduate students in special education and found there to be a perceived decrease in their stress levels, among other well-being enhancers such as better sleep, feelings and behaviors. “Such curricula may help students to cope with the stress and anxiety experienced in their daily work and to develop a more therapeutic presence and more effective management of their treatment or classroom setting” (Tarrasch, 2015, p. 1331).

In-Service Teacher Training

Time constraints do not allow all school districts to implement teacher trainings on health, well-being or mindfulness, yet there is evidence to prove these professional development programs could be worth the time and resources to assist with teacher retention. Studies on in-service teacher stress-reduction programs show decreased teacher stress levels, and overall greater health and well-being, (Kolbe & Tirozzi, 2011; Sneyers, Jacobs, & Struyf, 2016) yet more research is needed to focus in on special educators specifically. Cavanagh, Strauss, Forder, and Jones point out a common concern, in that mindfulness training is still relatively new in educational settings yet studies show it has strong support in clinical settings (2014) and this concept has been supported by Goyal et al. (2014). This concern is also supported by Emerson et al. who make the point that, “School priorities are academic performance, and yet, there have been no large-scale, rigorous studies that show a strong relationship between mindfulness training for either teachers or pupils and attainment outcomes” (2017, p. 1147). This may lead to district and building administrators’ hesitancy to implement and spend time on any individual or systemic mindfulness trainings, as their confidence may be low due to limited evidence of stress-reducing benefits for their teachers. Once again, the perception can be a barrier without sufficient evidence. In contrast, a study by Sharp in 2015 spoke of the benefits of systemic mindfulness trainings, including decreased stress and increased emotional regulation on both an individual and administrative level.

The broad spectrum of research covered here shows an overall generalization that mindfulness training, in multiple forms, can be beneficial to the well-being of individuals, including special educators. Yet, there is also agreement among researchers that a lack of evidence-based methods and best practices for studying mindfulness leads to consumer confusion. This confusion may filter down to districts and individual educators, leading to various perceptions on the topic. The following section will cover the procedure and methodology of the present study, explaining how the researcher will gather responses from participants regarding their individual perception on the effectiveness of using mindfulness as a stress-reduction technique.

Methodology

Participants

The participants in this study were all educators, located in the Northeastern part of the United States. This included special educators who taught in both self-contained classes and who used the push-in and pull-out model. In addition, the participants also included teachers working as the general education teacher in an inclusive classroom, and one-to-one special educators. The criteria for educator selection was based on the educators working in a school setting and working directly with students with special needs on an instructional level.

Procedures

For this study, a quantitative survey was completed for this research topic and the survey was conducted completely online and anonymously, by various special educators. To create a quantitative survey, statements regarding mindfulness, special education and stress reduction techniques were categorized and listed using Google Forms for surveys, and responses were scaled on a Likert-type scale, using numbers one through five. One was “strongly disagree”, two was “disagree”, three was “neither agree nor disagree”, four was “agree”, and five was “strongly agree”. After consent was received via email from school building administrators, the survey was distributed to education professionals for their participation consideration. The participants received a link to the google form for the survey and they chose which questions, if any, they wanted to fill out. Once the respondent completed the survey and hit “submit”, their response was automatically sent to the researcher who had no identifying data or information on any of the participants, except from the answers they provided. Aside from the demographic questions, the survey provided research-related statements and the participants answered according to the defined Likert-type scale based on their experience and perception.

Data Collection and Analysis

Once IRB approval was received, school building administrators were contacted with the IRB consent form, asking for permission and assistance in distributing the stated copy and survey link to their building educators via email. The timeline for the data collection took place over a ten-day survey period and the instrument used to collect the data was an anonymous survey using the google form for surveys platform. Participants received a stated deadline in the distributed email as to when the survey was to be completed and submitted, if they chose to participate. Regarding the safeguarding of information, the google form survey was completely anonymous with no identifying information collected, submitted or stored. The data collected from the responses was stored in a password protected environment online and was not accessible to any person other than the researcher. Therefore, the participants’ confidentiality was completely protected during the entire process.

Analysis Method and Purpose

This research project intended to better understand the perceptions that special educators may have with regards to the effectiveness of using mindfulness strategies to decrease their stress and increase their health and well-being. The distributed survey contained statements regarding mindfulness, occupational stress, teacher burnout, pre-service teacher training, in-service teacher training, and other related items. The submitted responses were then analyzed by the researcher to determine a possible connection between results, past studies, theory and practice.

The following results section will give detailed descriptions of the data results from the survey responses, categorized into groups aligning with the survey statement categories.

Results

The aim of this research study was to gauge the perceived effectiveness of using mindfulness as a stress-reduction technique among special educators. Within this question, the study surveyed special educators’ views on multiple subcategories directly related to mindfulness and the field of special education. These results are categorized and spelled out below and include: demographics, mindfulness fundamentals, special educators’ role and stress, pre-service training, and in-service training.

Demographics

Of the thirty-two respondents, over 90% were females and all were from the Northeastern United States. Almost 60% of respondents fell in the 30-49 age groups, and 32% were age 50 or over. Seventy-five percent of participants have been teaching for ten or more years. Sixty-nine percent of respondents held a master’s degree, and another 15% had a master’s degree in progress, leading to greater than 80% of respondents having graduate study experience. Regarding roles, more than 78% of respondents were general education teachers in inclusive classrooms, with the remaining respondents being special educators in either self-contained classrooms, as a one-to-one with a student, or in a push-in/pull-out model. See Table 1 for complete demographic data.

Table 1
Participant Characteristics

Characteristic	Variable	%^a
Region	<i>Northeastern U.S.</i>	100
Gender	Female	91%
	Male	6%
	Unknown	3%
Years Teaching	0-2	15%
	3-5	7%
	6-9	3%
	<i>10-15</i>	23%
	16 & over	52%

Age	21-29	10%
	30-49	58%
	50 & older	32%
Education	Undergraduate degree	100%
	Master's degree	69%
Type of Educator	Special Education Teacher (various settings)	20%
	General Education in inclusion class	80%

^a Percentages are approximations rounded to the nearest percent.

Mindfulness

Mindfulness Foundational Statements in the survey reported on participants' views regarding mindfulness fundamentals and any personal experience participants had with mindfulness. Table 2 shows results of the mindfulness foundational survey items among special educators and general educators in inclusion classrooms. The data shows more than 65% of respondents reported having a solid grasp on the definition of mindfulness, and 25% were neutral on this response. When asked about the necessary inclusion of a seated meditation being part of a mindfulness practice, respondents seemed unsure, or neutral, on this statement, with over 40% responding "neither agree nor disagree". When asked about their personal mindfulness practice, more than 62% of respondents stated they do not have one, with 28% responding in the positive.

Table 2
Responses to Mindfulness Foundational Statements

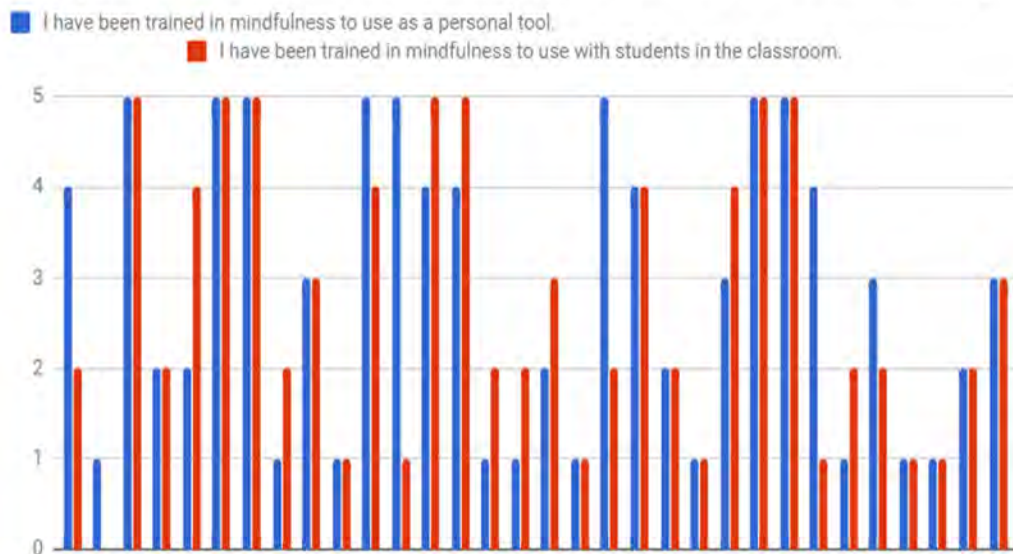
	I feel I have a solid grasp on the definition of mindfulness.	I believe seated meditation must be a part of a mindfulness practice.	I believe mindfulness has a religious connotation.	I have a regular mindfulness or meditation practice.	I have been trained in mindfulness to use as a personal tool.	I have been trained in mindfulness to use with students in the classroom.	Mindfulness is just a passing "fad" or trend.
Scale*	%	%	%	%	%	%	%

5	32	9	0	9	25	22.5	0
4	34	16	6	19	16	13	6
3	25	41	3	9	12	10	28
2	6	28	28	25	16	32	19
1	3	6	63	38	31	22.5	47

* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Regarding the respondents' perception of mindfulness having a religious connotation, greater than 90% did not view there to be a connection. Additionally, participants were asked to reply with whether they believed mindfulness was just a passing "fad" or trend, with 67% disagreeing, and 6% in agreement.

Figure 1
Comparisons of responses between personal and classroom training



While Table 2 shows the percentages of respondents who have or have not been trained in mindfulness for either personal use, or for use in the classroom, Figure 1 displays this data for individual responses. The researcher felt it was important that this figure show comparisons between individual participant's responses regarding whether they were trained in mindfulness for personal use versus being trained in mindfulness for use in the classroom with students. This additional figure is included to distinguish between the comparison of responses on a summarized scale against possible individual response differences. Based on the individual response comparisons, 28% of participants agree that they were trained for both personal use *and*

for use in the classroom. Thirty-eight percent of respondents state they were *not* trained in mindfulness for either personal use or for use in the classroom. Twenty-two percent of respondents showed a discrepancy between being trained in the two types of mindfulness.

Special Educators and Stress

The following survey items were phrased to seek participants’ perceptions on the role of the special educator regarding any related stress, burnout, and accompanying techniques. See Table 3 for a complete set of results for this category. One hundred percent of respondents were either neutral or agreed/strongly agreed that special educators have a high level of stress in their work environment. When asked if they felt a high level of stress can lead to job burnout among special educators, 93% agreed and just over 6% did not agree. When asked if they felt special educators needed to implement techniques to combat the stress of their work environment, 87% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed. Thirteen percent were neutral, and 0% of respondents disagreed with this statement. This statement was followed up with questions regarding techniques used for stress reduction. When asked about personal stress reduction techniques, 51% stated they do have methods used for stress reduction. When asked their perception of mindfulness being an effective tool for special educators, 77% agreed, with only 10% in disagreement.

While 81% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that mindfulness can reduce the stress of and increase the well-being for special educators, only 29% stated they use mindfulness as a method for stress reduction. Of the respondents, 20% felt they do not have enough time to learn or use mindfulness, and 53% felt they did have enough time to learn and use mindfulness. Only 9% of participants agreed there are better methods than mindfulness for stress reduction, but 87% felt mindfulness should be combined with other techniques for optimal stress reduction.

Table 3
Responses to Special Educators’ Role Statements

	Special educators have a high level of stress in their work environment.	Special educators need to implement techniques to combat the stress of their work environment.	Special educators’ increased stress levels can lead to job burnout.	I have specific stress reduction techniques that I use for my well-being.	Mindfulness can be an effective personal tool for special educators.
Scale*	%	%	%	%	%
5	64	56	68	32	32
4	26	31	26	19	45
3	10	13	3	29	13

2	0	0	3	13	7
1	0	0	0	7	3
	Mindfulness can reduce the stress of and increase the well-being for special educators.	I use mindfulness as a method for stress reduction.	I do not have enough time to learn or use mindfulness.	I believe there are better methods than mindfulness for stress reduction.	I believe mindfulness should be combined with other techniques for optimal stress reduction.
Scale*	%	%	%	%	%
5	23	16	3	0	39
4	58	13	17	9	48
3	16	29	27	52	10
2	3	23	23	26	0
1	0	19	30	13	3

* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

Pre-Service Training

Table 4

Responses to Pre-Service Training Statements

	My teacher education/training program offered workshops and/or classes on mindfulness as a stress reduction technique.	Teacher education/training programs should have optional workshops and/or classes to teach mindfulness as a method for stress reduction.	Teacher education/training programs should have required workshops and/or classes to teach mindfulness as a method for stress reduction.
Scale*	%	%	%
5	7	48	28
4	3	31	17

3	10	17	41
2	21	3	14
1	59	0	0

* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

The pre-service training section contained three statements that asked participants about their pre-service training programs and any possible workshops or classes that were offered on using mindfulness as a stress reduction technique. Table 4 contains the complete results from this section.

Eighty percent of respondents stated their pre-service training programs did not have any workshops or classes on using mindfulness for stress reduction. The following two statements were asked to gauge whether respondents felt pre-service training programs *should* offer these types of classes. Seventy-nine percent of respondents agreed that pre-service programs should offer optional workshops or classes, while only 45% agreed these mindfulness workshops and classes should be mandatory.

In-Service Training

Table 5

Responses to In-Service Training Statements

	My school district offers mindfulness training as a method for stress reduction for their teachers.	School districts should offer optional training on using mindfulness as a method for stress reduction.	School districts should have mandatory training on using mindfulness as a method for stress reduction.	District mindfulness trainings for special educators are a waste of time and resources.
Scale*	%	%	%	%
5	7	32	10	3
4	19	52	32	3
3	19	16	26	16
2	23	0	26	26
1	32	0	6	52

* 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neither agree nor disagree, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree.

The in-service training section contained four statements that asked participants about their in-service mindfulness training programs, if any, and whether they felt these types of workshops should be offered on an optional or required basis.

Twenty-six percent of participants agreed that their district did offer mindfulness training as a method for stress reduction for their teachers, and 55% stated their district did not. Yet, 84% of respondents felt these types of trainings should be offered on an optional basis, and 42% felt they should be required for district teachers.

When asked about their perception of whether district mindfulness trainings for special educators were a waste of time and resources, only 6% agreed with this statement. Seventy-eight percent disagreed, and 16% of respondents felt neutral about this statement.

Summary

In summary, the survey for this study determined that most respondents felt they had a solid grasp on the definition of mindfulness and did not perceive mindfulness as just a passing “fad” or trend. In comparing possible mindfulness training for either personal or classroom use, over one-quarter of respondents stated they *were* trained for both areas, with just under 40% of respondents stating they were *not* trained in either method.

Ninety percent of respondents agreed that special educators have a high level of stress in their work environment, with nearly all respondents agreeing this stress can lead to job burnout. Over three-quarters of respondents felt mindfulness can help combat this work-related stress, yet just over half felt they had enough time to learn and use mindfulness.

Regarding pre-service training programs, less than one-quarter of respondents stated their program had mindfulness workshops or classes. Over three-quarters of participants felt there should be optional mindfulness pre-service trainings, and less than half felt these pre-service trainings should be required.

For in-service training programs, one-quarter of participants stated their district offers mindfulness trainings for stress reduction, and over three-quarters felt there should be optional trainings available for teachers by their district. These results and their implications will be discussed and interpreted next in the discussion and conclusion section.

Discussion and Conclusion

The intent of this study was to investigate the perceived effectiveness of using mindfulness as a strategy for special educators in coping with the stress of their work environment. The goal was to gauge the significance of the various factors applied to this research topic regarding special educators’ perceptions on mindfulness, occupational stress, pre-service mindfulness training and in-service mindfulness training.

Participants included thirty-two special educators and general educators in inclusive settings, from the Northeastern United States. All survey responses by participants were anonymous, aside from the given demographic information, as listed in Table 1. Through the quantitative interpretation of participants’ responses to survey statements, the researcher has made relevant

statistical connections within the data. These connections cover the categories of mindfulness, special educators' role and stress, pre-service teacher training and in-service teacher training, and will be interpreted below.

Mindfulness

In the present study, mindfulness is the central theme around which perceptions and answers are based. While the central focus of this research is on the perceived effectiveness of mindfulness by special educators, the author felt it essential to first understand the participants' background with mindfulness.

To give an opinion on a topic or idea, it is beneficial to first have a firm understanding of the idea. Most respondents in this study either agreed or strongly agreed that they had a solid grasp on the definition of mindfulness. Although, there is no *one* universally agreed upon definition of mindfulness, leading to the potential for various mindfulness definitions being "grasped" by the participants. Additionally, due to the difference in age groups of the respondents, different generations could have varied beliefs and definitions of mindfulness. For example, respondents under age 30 did not feel they had a solid grasp on the definition of mindfulness, yet the uncertainty of this understanding decreased as the age group increased. This direct correlation does agree with current findings, as researchers are finding the broad range of mindfulness-based interventions that have sprung up in recent years have a lack of evidence-backed research, which can lead to confusion by the public (Van Dam et al., 2017). Older generations may have grown up with a clearer and more succinct mindfulness definition and description as the introduction of mindfulness into the United States began arising in the late 1970's. While the researcher recognizes the possible discrepancy in the definition of mindfulness between generations, they acknowledge that the definition of mindfulness plays a lesser role than in its practice, the latter of which leading to a more accurate perception.

Regarding applications of mindfulness, over 40% of participants agree that they have been trained in using mindfulness as a personal tool, yet, only 35% state they were trained in using mindfulness with students in the classroom. This contradicts the 2012 Kelly study, where she stated that teachers were gaining more training in mindfulness for use in the classroom versus personal use. This could be due to the current study's small sample size, or due to increases in personal mindfulness trainings for educators over the past 6 years. Figure 1 breaks down the individual responses for this survey response comparison. These results show that 66% of respondents were either equally trained in both personal and classroom mindfulness uses, or not trained in either. This infers that most educators who are exposed to mindfulness, whether through voluntary means or mandatory trainings, are trained in both methods. Conversely, educators who are not exposed to mindfulness do not receive trainings in either method. Since only 6% of respondents feel mindfulness is just a passing fad or trend, this does not seem a significant factor involved in mindfulness training responses.

Special Educators' Role and Stress

Along with mindfulness, special educators and their high levels of occupational stress are the focus of the current study. The results show that one hundred percent of respondents were either neutral or agreed/strongly agreed that special educators have a high level of stress in their work environment. Additionally, 94% of the respondents agreed that this high level of occupational

stress can lead to job burnout. These results agreed with current statistics regarding educator attrition. Since 78% of respondents state they have been teaching for six or more years, their responses infer they are among the resilient 50% that did not leave the profession within the first five years (Feistritz, 2011) demonstrating a possible predilection toward a more solution driven attitude. As a result, these educators may be more open to various methods of stress reduction to combat work fatigue, including a greater perception of using mindfulness. Therefore, most participants for this study acknowledged the challenge that special educators face and their subsequent consequences, leading us to the question of training and implementation.

While over 40% of respondents stated they were trained in using mindfulness as a personal tool, it is unknown whether these trainings were received outside of their professional environment. Of the respondents, just under 30% state they do use mindfulness as a stress reduction technique. Assuming the above stated participants are the same respondents that stated they were trained in using mindfulness as a personal tool, that results in a 75% applied use. The author feels this is a significant finding within the current study, denoting a strong correlation between personal mindfulness trainings and perceived effectiveness of the function of mindfulness by the user. Additionally, over 80% of these educational participants agreed that mindfulness can reduce the stress and increase the well-being of special educators. This statement refers directly to the research topic in question and further reinforces the author's findings of positive perceived effectiveness of using mindfulness as a stress reduction technique. Yet, when compared to the relatively low percentage of participants who have been trained in using mindfulness as a personal tool, the author speculates that a lack of accessibility of these trainings may be at the root of this disparity. The following sections will reinforce this hypothesis based on interpretation of the results.

Pre-Service Teacher Training

Ten percent of study participants stated their teacher training program offered some type of training on using mindfulness for personal stress reduction, yet almost 80% agreed or strongly agreed that pre-service teacher programs should offer at least optional mindfulness training programs. Research has shown success with training pre-service teachers through their graduate studies, resulting in decreased stress levels and greater well-being (Hartigan, 2017; Tarrasch, 2015). Based on the study's previous results regarding the participants' strong interest in using mindfulness for stress reduction, the author agrees with beginning mindfulness training during graduate studies. In this post-secondary setting, there may be more time and resources available compared with K-12 public systems, allowing for these types of workshops or classes.

In-Service Teacher Training

While only 26% of respondents state their current district offers workshops on mindfulness training for teachers' stress reduction, over 80% agree or strongly agree that districts should offer at least optional workshops on this topic. These numbers correlate to this study's previously stated results regarding educators' strong interest in using mindfulness for stress reduction but not having the proper training.

While many school districts offer Professional Development opportunities for their staff, both optional and required, time constraints often lead districts to use those times for curricular focus. Emerson et al. present the idea that the main priorities of school districts remain academic, and

no large-scale studies have been completed that show the direct connection between mindfulness and its benefits for teachers (2017). Although time constraints during school hours may be a hindrance, implementing a wellness initiative may offer teachers strategies to reduce their stress and increase their well-being, thereby decreasing teacher burnout.

Limitations

Like all research studies, there are limitations that exist within the present study. For example, all participants were from the Northeastern United States, which displays a specific subset of the teaching population. A more thorough study extension can test various regions of the United States for comparison. Additionally, the sample size of the participant population was relatively small, at 32 in total. Increasing the sample size would give a broader and clearer range of perceptions among various special educators.

Recommendations for Future Research

The current study has many opportunities for future research, based on the included findings. One recommendation would be a quasi-experimental study, comparing participants who perceive mindfulness as an effective technique for stress reduction among special educators with participants who do *not* believe mindfulness is an effective technique for stress reduction among special educators. This study would further develop the understanding of whether a perception of an idea or concept can, in fact, alter the potential effectiveness of that stress-reduction technique. Participants can all go through the same eight-week MBSR training, using scaled responses at timed intervals to gauge the effectiveness of the technique. Despite the limitations, the results of the present study indicate that implementing a mindfulness practice among special educators in various settings, and among general education teachers in inclusive settings, would be a welcome and beneficial method for decreasing the stress and increasing the well-being of these important educators. The evidential high rates of burnout and attrition among special educators warrants intervention, and this study adds to the educational research findings that special educators are open to learning about and using mindfulness as a method for stress reduction.

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