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When the ‘Mindfulness Wars’ Enter the Classroom: Making Sense of the Critique of School-Based Mindfulness

Nis Langer Primdahl

Abstract

The introduction of mindfulness into schools and its potential effects on health and wellbeing promotion have received substantial attention among scholars. However, the implications and consequences thematized by critics of school-based mindfulness have yet to receive the same analytical scrutiny. One side has praised mindfulness as a useful instrument to improve students’ wellbeing, mental health, and learning outcomes; by contrast, the opposing side has suggested that such practices are yet another quick fix for neoliberal developments in education. Guided by the prospect of leaving behind the binary understanding of mindfulness practices as either highly beneficial or severely harmful, this paper examines and contextualizes the critical discussion of school-based mindfulness through a two-step conceptual analysis. First, I unpack how school-based mindfulness has emerged as a specific topic of discussion within the general field of critical mindfulness research. I argue that the critical discourse within the subfield of school-based mindfulness cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider range of critical agendas concerning general applications of mindfulness. Second, I unpack how the majority of critical scholars have adopted a particular critical approach to mindfulness, accentuating its binding entanglement with neoliberalism. In conclusion, I offer prospects for future critical treatments of school-based mindfulness.

Keywords: mindfulness; school-based mindfulness; contemplative practices; health education; critique; neoliberal

'To do criticism is to make harder those acts which are now too easy.'

Foucault, 1981/2001, p. 456

Introduction

While mindfulness in its Westernized variant has increased in popularity since its emergence in the 1970s, its expansion into schools is still in its early stages. The same is true of the critique of mindfulness, which, several decades later, has recently begun to receive attention, both among scholars and in the public sphere in a rising number of countries including the US, UK and the Scandinavian nations. At the same time, depictions of the everyday lives of children and young people as accelerating, stressful, and dominated by digitalization and escalating structural changes have become a common trope within recent discussions of mindfulness in school settings (Jennings et al., 2019; McCaw, 2020). This tendency has been accompanied by a 'contemplative turn in education', entailing an increased focus on the positive educational effects of such practices in terms of increased attentional capacity, self-awareness and emotional regulation (Baker, B. M., & Saari, A., 2018; Ergas, 2017). Furthermore, this turn is inscribed into the larger context of school-based health and wellbeing promotion (Simovska, 2012; WHO, 1998). However, the increasing popularity of mindfulness as one of several variants of contemplative practices in schools has polarized educational scholars. While the potential positive effects of introducing mindfulness in schools in terms of health and wellbeing promotion have been the subject of much scholarly attention within the last decade (Ergas & Hadar, 2019), the negative consequences raised by critics have yet to receive the same analytical and systematic scrutiny.

This conceptual paper is guided by the call made by Ergas & Hadar (2019) for a more versatile, non-dichotomic research agenda in the field of school-based mindfulness and

the prospect, highlighted by Harrington & Dunne (2015), to move beyond the dominating approaches that frame mindfulness as either highly beneficial or severely harmful. Ergas (2019) calls for establishing a dialogue between the two traditions of mindfulness and education. As a response to this call, one central aim of this article is to contextualize the critical discussion and various arguments critical of school-based mindfulness within the larger field of the general mindfulness critique by asking how this specific discussion has evolved from the broader, heterogeneous range of critique of mindfulness as a general concept. This question is inspired by recent debates framing school-based mindfulness as either a panacea or a dangerous extension of a neoliberalist agenda into education in schools (Hyland, 2015; Madsen, 2015). Gleig (2019) denotes the polemic nature of this debate the ‘Mindfulness Wars’ to signify the ways in which mindfulness faces critique from a large number of perspectives, mostly focusing on the lack of any political and/or ethical ambition. This points to a severe polarization of the public discussion, where it has become too easy to either glorify or demonize school-based mindfulness (cf. Foucault, 2001).

With the goal of following Foucault’s motion and making the critique of mindfulness in schools harder rather than taking it for granted, and of making sense of this critique and opening up for new directions and nuances in the debate, I engage with the critique of mindfulness in schools through a two-step conceptual analysis. This analytic move parallels the progression made by Ergas (2019) to trace and explore ‘how mindfulness is interpreted in the processes of its incorporation in educational systems’ (Ergas, 2019, p. 1490). However, while Ergas’ perspective aims to specify how mindfulness and education more generally can be thought and analyzed together, my focus here will be on what takes place when the general critique of mindfulness is focalized into a critique of school-based mindfulness. First, I unpack how school-based mindfulness has

emerged as a specific topic of discussion within the general field of critical mindfulness research. From a different perspective but in alignment with Hyland (2017), I argue, that the critical discourse within the specific field of school-based mindfulness cannot be viewed in isolation from the wider range of critical agendas covering the field of general applications of mindfulness. If we are to understand the developments within school-based mindfulness and the context of the emerging critique, an analytical outline of the general critical landscape should serve as a natural starting point. Second, based on this outline, I conduct a closer analysis of the critical discourses specific to school-based mindfulness.

Wellbeing in schools has emerged as a central policy concern over the last 10-15 years (Lindegaard Nordin et al., 2019; Spratt, 2017). The turn to practices incorporating mindfulness, yoga and other forms of meditation within school settings can be seen as an extension of this trend, in particular within the field of mental health promotion in schools (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016). Furthermore, this increase has been legitimized by a growing number of intervention-based studies pointing to the alleged positive effects on a wide range of outcomes in schools (Bakosh et al., 2016; Cullen 2011). On the other hand, this increased emphasis on health and wellbeing in schools has also led to an increase in critique and problematizations - a 'critical turn' in health education and promotion - concerned with power relations, values, politics and curricular content in education (Fitzpatrick & Tinning, 2014; Gottesman, 2016; Leahy & Simovska, 2017; Simovska & McNamara, 2015). School-based mindfulness has not evaded this turn; on the contrary, it has been easy prey for scholars as part of a general critique of what they see as neoliberal undercurrents in contemporary school-based practices, revolving around notions of self, selfhood and subjectivity (Reveley, 2016).

When originally introduced into general health promotion in the 1990s, mindfulness interventions were accompanied by experimental studies and embedded in the research paradigm of health science. However, research that specifically focuses on mindfulness in educational contexts is still in its infancy (Felver et al., 2016). As indicated by Crane et al. (2017) and Gethin (2011), there is no broad consensus on a definition of school-based mindfulness, and the concrete educational practices labeled as ‘mindfulness’ are in no way standardized. This means that the semantics of school-based mindfulness are yet to mature and establish clear reference points. While a number of reviews and analyses of school-based mindfulness have attempted to provide overviews of the emergence of mindfulness in educational settings (e.g. Roeser, 2014), much of the scholarly discussion has revolved around related questions concerning attempts to define the constitutive elements of school-based mindfulness. It follows that such questions and the implied conceptual vagueness as to what exactly is being discussed when referring to school-based mindfulness pose a problem for critics as well as advocates and practitioners; if there is no general agreement about precisely what mindfulness in schools promotes, any position can be promoted and any criticism can be evaded by giving an alternative definition.

The analytical approach in this article is guided by delineations of different forms of criticality (Biesta & Stams, 2001; Burbules & Berk, 1999) and the notion of ‘post-critical’ within the specific context of health and wellbeing education (Primdahl et al., 2018). Biesta & Stams identify three conceptions of criticality by how they justify the position from where the critique originates: a) critical dogmatism, b) transcendental critique, and c) deconstruction. Drawing on these three conceptions, I discuss how they align with the general critical landscape of mindfulness and the specific critique of school-based mindfulness. The first conception of criticality, critical dogmatism,

designates a form of critique where the criterion for critical evaluation is placed outside the discourse - what the authors also designate as a 'safe place outside' the sphere of that which is being criticized (Biesta & Stams, 2001, p. 69). This entails an external point, for instance lack of evidence of positive effects, as a fundamental means of justification. The second form, transcendental critique, does not commit to an external and dogmatic fixed point, instead focusing on internal or performative contradictions in the argumentation or communication through which the object of critique is legitimized. According to Biesta & Stams, this form of criticality appeals to a particular notion of rationality as a method of legitimizing its claims and is in that sense similar to critical dogmatism in its dependence on external assurance for validity (Biesta & Stams, 2001, p. 65). The last form of criticality, deconstruction, differentiates itself from the first two forms by departing from the solid foundation of (arbitrary) dogmas or rationalism. The assumption here is that no self-sufficient verification procedure can ultimately validate any form of critique, whereby the only option is to include the criteria for critique in the domain of what is criticized (Biesta & Stams, 2001, p. 69). In particular, their analysis is driven by the idea that the incompleteness and the generative potential of a critical position can be viewed as a strength rather than as a theoretical weakness. This rests on the post-critical assumption that positional incompleteness provides a better point of departure for constructive reworkings of educational policies than 'saturated' or dismissed positions (Primdahl et al., 2018).

The Landscape: Situating debates on school-based mindfulness within broader critical discourses

Although mindfulness was introduced in the United States at the end of the 1970s as one of several practices aimed at reducing stress, it was a slow burn (Wilson, 2014). It was not until 1990 that Jon Kabat-Zinn published the first seminal work on

mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Until that point, mindfulness had been used almost exclusively as an individual health promotion technique. Parallel to these early developments within public health domains, mindfulness began to be employed in other domains and settings, such as the military, or in initiatives targeting particular groups such as incarcerated or pregnant (Ergas, 2014). This also implied a change in the basic conditions of the target groups; while initially MBSR was offered to people with health issues as part of their rehabilitation, its use was later broadened to other groups and fields. This meant that mindfulness was transformed into something more than treatment as its potential use to prevent future health risks or improve mental wellbeing was explored. This transformation became central to school-based applications, where MBSR was introduced as early as 1992 in the US as part of an early intervention in 3-5 grade classrooms (Cheek et al., 2017).

The general critique of mindfulness did not pick up speed in the public sphere until the beginning of the 2010s. In 2013, a highly influential post, titled 'Beyond McMindfulness' and authored by Purser and Loy, was published on the popular online site Huffington Post (Purser & Loy, 2013). Here, a key point is that mindfulness commits to what the authors call a 'Faustian bargain', where rather than being applied 'as a means to awaken individuals and organizations from the unwholesome roots of greed, ill will and delusion, [mindfulness] is usually being refashioned into a banal, therapeutic, self-help technique that can actually reinforce those roots' (Purser & Loy, 2013). The authors claim that mindfulness and its benefits do not come without a price. The basic structure of this argument, often repeated by critics, is that despite its claims of emancipation, in practice, mindfulness has the opposite effect. Further, some critics, for example Purser & Milillo (2015), combine their critique of mindfulness's alignment with neoliberalism, commodification and capitalism with objections to what they

consider a betrayal of mindfulness's Buddhist origins. These objections are supported by contestation of the evidence for the positive effects of mindfulness interventions.

In the literature, a few attempts to summarize the general critique of mindfulness can be identified. Acknowledging numerous objections towards mindfulness, Repetti (2016, p. 476-477) emphasizes four major criticisms. Firstly, mindfulness 'fails to attempt to change the world'; secondly, mindfulness 'is guilty by association with other ends to which its use is applied'; thirdly, mindfulness 'ought not to be separated from its Buddhist ethical framework'; and lastly, 'mindfulness is not as important to Buddhism as Westerners think it is'. This and other reviews (e.g. Walsh, 2016) distinguish between critique addressing political aspects (the first two points) and critique addressing the spiritual or religious aspects of mindfulness (the last two points). In addition, Walsh (2016, p.156) also points to the lack of evidence for the positive effects of mindfulness as a problem for both apologists and critics and describes how the notion of mindfulness as a Trojan horse circulates in various forms among critics.

The political and spiritual lines of critique are however not fully exhaustive. Based on the literature, at least three additional branches of critique can be identified in the spectrum of critical discourses when mapping the general landscape of mindfulness critique in order to contextualize the critique of school-based mindfulness. These branches are presented below.

What all these branches have in common is that *one* particular representation of mindfulness acts as a basis for critical discussion; i.e., each critical position relies on a representation of mindfulness as a non-solution to a particular problem. Instead of recommending mindfulness as a way to solve a problem, each critical case can be viewed as a non-recommendation that mindfulness be applied for that purpose. It should

also be noted that the branches are interrelated in the sense that concrete arguments against mindfulness often involve more than one branch.

Central branches of the general mindfulness critique:

- Mindfulness as...
- i. neoliberal instrument ('McMindfulness')
 - ii. distorted spirituality/religion
 - iii. methodologically ambiguous
 - iv. clinically negligent
 - v. a form of temporal coping

Mindfulness as a neoliberal instrument

The idea of mindfulness as a neoliberal instrument for self-optimization or as a method of adapting yourself to the ever-changing nature of (post)modern capitalism is the most dominant trope (cf. Kristensen, 2018; Madsen, 2015; Žižek, 2001; Walsh, 2018).

Echoing Marx, Drougge (2016) characterizes mindfulness as a form of opiate for the middle class. This representation is supplemented by the accusation that mindfulness has become commodified to such a degree its original ethical framework has been lost.

McMindfulness, the epithet applied to mindfulness in its commodified form, designates ‘a technique for just about any instrumental purpose’ and ‘unmoored from a vision of the social good, the commodification of mindfulness keeps it anchored in the ethos of the market’ (Purser, 2019, p. 17). The concealing nature of such practices is furthermore emphasized by Purser, where the discrepancy between the false reality (contemplation as emancipation) and the hidden truth (contemplation as reinforcement of oppressive structural conditions) is accentuated, forming the basis of the ideological conceptualization. This logic is also present in the critique put forward by Kristensen (2017), who again underlines the contradictory effects of mindfulness in reinforcing the structural causes of stress it was supposed to treat. The boost in mental resources that the individual achieves through mindfulness practices only serve to recharge the batteries for a new sprint toward further adaptation, after which there is a need to recharge once again. Hence, the solution reinforces the problem, and mindfulness thereby becomes what Kristensen labels a quick fix or a form of coping strategy as also seen in the fifth branch of the general mindfulness critique (Kristensen, 2018, p. 14).

Mindfulness as distorted spirituality or religion

Another axis of debate is whether mindfulness implies a religious element; more specifically, whether it adheres to various schools of Buddhism. The core question can also be reversed by asking whether the ‘mindfulness movement’ has betrayed its Buddhist origins and ethical obligations in its attempts to appeal to and comply with mainstream secularized domains such as healthcare, education and working life (Brazier, 2013; Brown, 2019). As Monteiro (2015) points out, this question also implies a distinction between traditional and contemporary mindfulness. The traditional camp is united in its concern for instrumental applications of mindfulness; an

instrumentalization that betrays Buddhist thought, in particular through its (lack of) ethics. Proponents of contemporary approaches to mindfulness, meanwhile, apply mindfulness-based interventions motivated by specific objectives, such as improving resilience, self-regulation or learning. According to traditionalists, this form of instrumentalization aims for ‘relief (if not always freedom) from symptoms and attitudes that result in distress’, which thereby limits the potential for tackling the actual causes of distress (Monteiro et al., 2015, p. 11). The critical strategy of depicting mindfulness interventions as symptom treatment is thereby also evident in this critical discourse linking it to the first branch of critique. Dreyfus (2011) points out that one implication of the secular instrumentalization of mindfulness is a break with the Buddhist ideal of leaving the self behind:

The practice of retentive focus (mindfulness proper) is not the goal but a means to a more explicitly cognitive end. Its main point is not to obtain a calm and focused state, however helpful such a state may be, but to use this state to gain a deeper understanding of the changing nature of one’s bodily and mental states so as to free our mind from the habits and tendencies that bind us to suffering. (Dreyfus, 2011, p. 51)

This line of argumentation builds on the assumption that instrumentalization – ‘however helpful’ - is inadequate in relation to the ethical imperative of ‘original’ mindfulness; namely that it must never be used as a means to an end. On the other hand, advocates of secularized mindfulness argue that its core ethical values and norms, such as empathy and not being judgmental, are embedded in the practice of mindfulness and not in theoretical frameworks.

In another line of critique, Brown (2016, p. 90) points to a positive rhetoric within contemporary mindfulness practice that identifies with and draws legitimacy from the

spiritual or religious roots of mindfulness while also distancing itself from precisely these aspects by emphasizing the essential secularity of mindfulness. This entails that both secular and non-secular aspects of mindfulness are either accentuated or downplayed depending on which logics of legitimization are expected in a particular discussion. Brown links such gestures to the practice of ‘codeswitching’:

Mindfulness marketers may employ religious and secular discourses simultaneously: describing religious concepts with language of science and spirituality; through self-censorship, selecting certain concepts or practices to omit disclosing while emphasizing others; and by means of camouflage, or concealing followed by carefully timed, gradual introduction of spiritual nuggets as perceived benefits win over cautious novices. (Brown, 2016, p. 77)

In this case, the rhetorical strategy is based on constant oscillation between various vocabularies within a multiplicity of contexts aimed at achieving specific goals. Sun (2014) argues that mindfulness is strategically oversimplified when its advocates, including Kabat-Zinn, claim to have secularized it.

Mindfulness as methodologically ambiguous

Compared to the influence and prevalence of the two critical discourses discussed so far, the remaining three forms of critical discourse on mindfulness are less developed. The third branch is directed at what could be described as the ‘methodological ambiguity’ of mindfulness studies, either focusing on the lack of common standards for measuring effects or an over-reliance on self-reporting measures. Van Dam et al. (2018) criticize the lack of consensus regarding how mindfulness should be defined, which leads to problems in replicating empirical studies. Gethin (2011) links

this problem to the aforementioned discourse regarding Buddhism when accentuating the major discrepancies between secularized and religious variants of mindfulness.

Mindfulness as clinically negligent

The fourth branch of critique, that mindfulness is clinically negligent, is centered on how mindfulness can potentially result in negative health outcomes and have adverse, damaging effects among participants (see for example Britton, 2019; Cebolla et al., 2017; Van Gordon et al., 2017). Such criticism is closely linked to the above critique of methodological ambiguity as the lack of valid research on adverse effects, it is argued, results from such methodological challenges and the lack of consensus regarding definitions of basic concepts. However, one might also suggest that this ambiguity likewise highlights a problem for critics in the sense that the lack of consensus in defining mindfulness makes it difficult to focus the critique.

Mindfulness as a form of temporal coping

The fifth and final branch of critical discourse distinguishes itself from the other four by addressing the temporal aspects of mindfulness. The German sociologist Hartmut Rosa developed a grand social theory of late modern society built upon the notion of social acceleration and temporality (Rosa, 2013). Rosa views mindfulness as an attempt to deploy *deceleration* or strategic slowdowns to counter acceleration; an attempt which, according to Rosa, is doomed to failure because of the unstoppable force of acceleration (Rosa, 2013; see also Alhadeff-Jones, 2017). According to Rosa, contemplative practices are to be characterized as examples of strategic slowdown, which in turn:

(...) serve the goal of coping with the swift-paced life of the workplace, relationships, or everyday routine even more successfully, i.e., faster, afterward. They represent oases of deceleration where one goes to “refuel” and “get going again.” (Rosa, 2013, p. 87)

Thus, Rosa’s critique can be linked to the idea of mindfulness as a coping strategy with no potential to overcome the structural conditions causing the need it in the first place. What distinguishes this form of critique is its consideration of temporality and the ideals of slowness and being in the moment that characterize mindfulness practices.

In light of the three forms of criticality suggested by Biesta and Stams (2001), all five critical discourses discussed above seem to be based upon external assessment criteria and can therefore be characterized as predominantly dogmatic. In the first, second and fifth critical branches, mindfulness is evaluated based on the external criterion linked to its potential to fulfill social justice or emancipation; a criterion which, according to these critics, mindfulness in its neoliberal, commodified form fails to satisfy. Branches three and four also evaluate mindfulness based on external criteria: respectively the principle of objective methodological consistency and the ideal of clinical effectiveness. However, following Biesta and Stams (2001) and Primdahl et al. (2018), the analysis also shows that the forms of critique are not clear-cut; elements of transcendental critique are to be found among all five branches, with evaluative criteria resting on formal discursive parameters rather than external conditions. In branch two, for example, this is evident when critics claim that mindfulness posits an inherent performative contradiction by attempting to be spiritual/religious and secular at the same time. It is hereby evident that several critical paradigms are employed simultaneously within the specific branches, whether rooted in external criteria or formalism. However, the dominant treatment of mindfulness among critics is that of an

object approached from the outside, pointing to a lack of critical approaches founded on the deconstructive tenet that critique must be grounded in the internal dynamics of its object. In the discussion I return to the potential of opening up new critical spaces along the lines of deconstruction related specifically to school-based mindfulness.

The evolution of critique of school-based mindfulness

When transposing the debate on the overall applicability and value of mindfulness for a multitude of societal purposes to the context of schooling, several critics have raised the question of which educational outcomes such practices are meant to serve (cf. Ecclestone, 2017; Forbes, 2019; Hyland, 2015; Ng, 2016; Purser, 2019; Reveley, 2016). Here, a key concern are the regulatory ideals, qualities and discourses promoted through various classroom implementations of mindfulness programs, whether short-term interventions, regular sessions spanning several years, or sporadic use integrated with other teaching activities. Some critics link school-based mindfulness to a form of neo-colonialism, built upon cultural appropriation and white privilege (Purser, 2019). This position contends that the Western appropriation of mindfulness neglects issues related to race, whiteness and social-economic inequalities, thereby reiterating the narrative of the teacher as ‘white savior’ (Purser, 2019, p. 188). Ecclestone & Lewis (2014) frame mindfulness as part of a wider-reaching therapeutic turn in education, where the aim is to prevent mental health problems by promoting social and emotional competencies such as empathy, resilience and optimism. In this line of thought, mindfulness is categorized, alongside interventions modelled on positive psychology, self-help and self-counseling, as a form of medicalization (Ecclestone, 2017). According to this branch of critique, construing mindfulness as a form of remedy assumes a voluntarist subject. Nielsen & Herskind (2016) further argue that this application of mindfulness

leads to a medicalization of everyday life, where societal or structural causes of mental pathologies are individualized by positioning students as having the choice to cure themselves, thereby transferring responsibility and accountability for mental health from society to the individual. As described by Friedmann (2016):

(...) the good intentions of MBIs [Mindfulness Based Interventions] to reduce stress and to increase emotional wellbeing is an attempt to address a systemic, institutionally created set of issues. Rather than instituting interventions that engage directly with such a set of issues, MBIs become instrumental in passing the reparative burden off to the students they aim to improve. (Friedmann, 2016, p. 235)

This critique is directed at the instrumental nature of mindfulness interventions aimed at school-aged children and young people; more specifically, the ways in which the responsibility for the student's mental health and wellbeing is transposed to the level of the individual. Prominent within this branch of critique of mindfulness is research conducted within the paradigm of health promoting schools (WHO, 1998; Simovska & McNamara, 2015). This approach considers students' health and wellbeing as linked to the psychosocial environment at schools, as well as to broader sociocultural factors, rather than as an individual matter. For example, Green et al. (2015) find it useful to distinguish between two major perspectives on health promotion in schools: a bio-medical perspective, where the health of individuals is viewed as determined solely by biomedical factors, and a socio-ecological perspective, where the individual's wellbeing is seen as always embedded within a holistic understanding of social contexts and conditions. With reference to the health-promoting schools paradigm, the critique put forward in this article aligns with the socio-ecological perspective, relying on a systemic understanding of students' wellbeing, and opposes the bio-medical perspective, where students' wellbeing is placed on the curriculum, in this case in the form of mindfulness

programs, with a view to using schools to modify individual behavior and prevent mental health problems. In this regard, the critique of school-based mindfulness is embedded in the deeper question on whether structural dynamics or individual subjects are to be considered ontologically primordial and raises discussion concerning the purposes of education and the role of different interventions in schools.

In the context of school-based mindfulness, the link between temporality as acceleration and attention is also questioned. Drawing on the theorist Franco Berardi, O'Donnell (2015) points to information overload and the increased burden on attention caused by the speed of social acceleration. Reveley (2015) discusses mindfulness, not as a way of increasing schoolchildren's attention capacity, but as a method for increasing levels of tolerance so even more information can be consumed. This understanding is repeatedly linked to mindfulness as a distorted form of emancipation that reinforces the mechanisms and structures it was meant to dissolve or offer emancipation from (Barker, 2014; Nielsen & Lind, 2016). The specific critique of school-based mindfulness in this line of thinking inevitably carries political implications. One example is Reveley's framing of mindfulness in schools as a direct expression of neoliberal governance of the subject where '(...) the medicalizing force of mindfulness meditation increases the tautness of the neoliberal noose' (Reveley, 2016, p. 508). Reveley's accusation aligns with the branch of general critique concerned with mindfulness as an instrument of neoliberalism. This is also echoed by the two most recent and detailed critiques of educational mindfulness, put forward by Purser (2019) and Forbes (2019), to which I will now turn for a closer analysis. These two recent examples of critical positions are, I argue, representative of a general pattern within critical approaches to school-based mindfulness by acknowledging a positive potential while remaining highly skeptical of current applications of mindfulness in schools.

Purser and Forbes both specifically and explicitly address the field of educational mindfulness in their respective books ‘McMindfulness’ (Purser, 2019) and ‘Mindfulness and Its Discontents’ (Forbes, 2019). One of the central critical themes in both books is the educational role that mindfulness plays in schools. They accuse mindfulness of extending and reinforcing the agenda of neoliberal self-optimization. They also add that mindfulness has the potential to be something else; that it has the potential to promote forms of subjectivity that are to be considered beneficial in an educational context. Instead of being instrumentally subservient, mindfulness can ideally be conceptualized as a way to promote civic awareness and emancipation, allowing transformation of the structural conditions that made such practices necessary in the first place. In other words, both Purser and Forbes suggest that mindfulness *can* be deployed with the educational purpose of empowering students to resist the neoliberal structural conditions linked to the distorted, instrumentalized form of mindfulness as an individual coping mechanism. In the following section, I briefly summarize the positions of Purser and Forbes enabling a broader contextualization of their critiques.

Purser uses the concept of ‘McMindfulness’ as a starting point, linking what he sees as the capitalist roots of mindfulness to the idea of a new form of capitalist spirituality. In contrast to Forbes, who is specifically concerned with education and schools, Purser’s criticism of school-based mindfulness is embedded in a broader critical analysis.

Echoing Zizek’s (2001) argument that mindfulness and meditation practices have replaced protestant ethics as the primary instrument for capitalism, Purser argues that cognitive capitalism has become widespread in classrooms (Purser, 2019, p. 188). This development is linked to the increase in therapeutic interventions in schools and to the endorsement of students’ subjectivity as entrepreneurs, making ‘children responsible for

adapting to circumstances, not trying to change them' (Purser, 2019, p. 201). With reference to critical pedagogy and Freire's concept of critical consciousness (Purser, 2019, p. 256), Purser develops this critique of the implied passivity of mindfulness by claiming that 3-minute breaks throughout the school day cannot promote the sort of critical attitude among students that Freire advocates (Purser, 2019, p. 256). As an alternative, he suggests the idea of 'revolutionary mindfulness', drawing on Erich Fromm (Purser, 2019, p. 258), where the imperative is to practice a particular form of being in the present moment, and of applying mindfulness to recognize the mutual conditioning of different arenas of emancipation - the ecological, social and personal (Purser, 2019, p. 259). This revolutionary element consists in transgressing the individual alienation caused by capitalism by 'seeking justice' and resisting the unjust. In an educational perspective, his approach is reminiscent of a form of Freirean process of conscientization, and of critical health education and the health-promoting school (Leahy & Simovska, 2017). However, Purser does not make clear precisely how regular and revolutionary mindfulness practices differ.

In 'Mindfulness and Its Discontents' (2019), David Forbes presents a double-sided perspective on educational mindfulness. Similar to Reveley and Purser, his critical analysis has one foot in the slipstream of the widespread depiction of mindfulness as an auxiliary arm to neoliberalism, while at the same time calling for a counter movement where mindfulness needs to become 'more mindful of itself'. (Forbes, 2019, p. 180). How so? The central argument is based on a distinction between secular mindfulness per se, Buddhist mindfulness and the 'employment' of mindfulness by educators (Forbes, 2019, p. 11). Forbes contends that the problem, and thereby the origin of 'McMindfulness', is not an inherent deficiency of mindfulness itself. Echoing the general problem of implementation within the field of health education, the problem lies

in its inadequate implementation by teachers, where it ends up reinforcing political oppression through ‘self-serving, privatized, individualized, neoliberal practice’ (Forbes, 2019, p. 10). In opposition to another branch of mindfulness critique, calling for a return to its Buddhist origins (Rosch, 2006), and in line with Purser, Forbes points to secular mindfulness’s potential to nurture critical, social and emancipatory acts, which can be seen as forms of subjectification in an educational perspective. To be ‘mindful’ in this sense is to be ‘critically conscious’, whereby mindfulness is understood as practices where students ‘uncover, challenge, and transcend how our thoughts, feelings, and actions are conditioned by unhealthy cultural practices and social institutions that (re)produce greed, meanness and delusion’ (Forbes, 2019, p. 206). This definition corresponds with his characterization of an unhealthy cultural practice. Critical mindfulness hereby becomes a practice that is able to transgress and uncover the ideology of mindfulness in its neoliberal form, teaching students to develop a critical attitude rooted in suspicion. To clarify this line of critique, I find the distinction made by McCaw (2020) between ‘thin’ and ‘thick’ mindfulness practices in education useful. ‘Thin’ conceptions of mindfulness in education refer to mental training practices aimed at individual self-improvement, while ‘thick’ conceptions assume that mindfulness should serve a deeper, transformative purpose often linked to its roots within the Buddhist tradition (McCaw, 2020, p 263ff.). The critique by Purser and Forbes of the present condition of school-based mindfulness transgress this distinction by on the one hand denouncing both improvement-based (thin) and Buddhist (thick) practices. On the other hand, the possibility of a genuinely transformative form of mindfulness is still preserved. In other words, this leaves room for a ‘thick’ form of mindfulness in schools, but the ‘thickness’ cannot take any form without losing its potential for emancipation.

To further elaborate these critical positions, Eve Sedgwick's (2003) distinction between two critical impulses linked, respectively, to suspicion and reparation may be relevant. Drawing on Paul Ricoeur's notion of a hermeneutics of suspicion, Sedgwick problematizes how suspicion has taken over as the dominant critical attitude, in the sense that, rather than being one of several possibilities when performing critical acts, this form has become a new 'imperative' or 'mandatory injunction' (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 125). The motive of suspicion is closely linked to paranoia, where the tracing and exposure of the critical object stands as the core critical motion. A key point is that, by becoming the standard approach to performing critique, suspicion has led to what Sedgwick designates a 'stultifying side-effect' where the relations between knowledge actors are caught in a reductive cycle (Sedgwick, 2003, p. 124). This notion of suspicion plays an important role among critics of school-based mindfulness and to current discussion climate within the field to which I will now turn.

Mindfulness, neoliberalism and subjectification

If we return to the introductory question concerning the link between general and specifically school-oriented critiques of mindfulness, it is evident that the trope of mindfulness as a neoliberal instrument applied in classrooms plays a significant role. This trope is founded on a general suspicion of school-based mindfulness as a variant of mindfulness in its commercialized form, on the surface promising increased resilience, self-regulation and learning, but ultimately functioning as a disciplinary practice or self-technology - i.e. an educational form of McMindfulness. This critical representation implies an emphasis on underlying effects that must be debunked: students become politically apathetic, are held accountable for their own stress and mental health problems, and are subjugated to a pedagogy based on radical individualism and

behaviorism. Walsh (2016) argues that the general critique of mindfulness is caught in a cycle where the critical lens is fixated on a narrow set of problems related to a fixed set of possible drawbacks or benefits of mindfulness. My analysis extends this point to the educational field, where the cycle originates in a fixation on school-based mindfulness as a false promise to relieve students from the consequences of neoliberal school reforms. A symptom of the cyclical nature is the level of repetition among critics, pointing to something of a standstill in the development of new lines of discussion. The cycle of repetition results in the polarized discussion of mindfulness mentioned in the introduction to this article, leaving little room for a constructive, ‘deconstructive’ (Biesta & Stams, 2001) or ‘reparative’ (Sedgwick, 2003) approaches to school-based mindfulness, which would include self-reflective critique as well as exploring the positive potentials of mindfulness. Such a critique, I argue, can and should consider the emancipatory ‘function’ of mindfulness in education. Not through its transformative, productive potential to empower or promote critical consciousness, as several critics propose, but rather as one of several elements in the classroom aimed at forming subjectivities based on a radically different form of responsibility than that espoused by critics of neoliberalism.

Reading school-based mindfulness practices suspiciously through the lens of neoliberalism might enable a coherent perspective on the mix of commercialization, spirituality and self-technologies, but as Cook (2016) has argued, ‘neoliberalism’ as the key interpretive tool can equally entail a form of reductionism. What is reduced is the multiplicity and complexity of the object of critique, in this case the introduction of mindfulness into schools. Cook suggests that the very concept of neoliberalism and the idea that mindfulness makes individuals responsible for their own wellbeing should not be unconditionally theorized within a neoliberal framework, but rather take into account

other modes of responsibility (Cook, 2016, p. 151). Therefore, when discussing the purposes of applying mindfulness in the classroom, it is necessary to consider that the responsabilization of individuals has more sides than just the neoliberal ideal of the self-governing, self-accountable individual (McCleod, 2017). Although Purser and Forbes attempt to formulate alternative applications of school-based mindfulness, the main goal of such alternatives seems to be an empowerment of students through their ability to adopt a critical attitude towards neoliberalism and its effects.

In the context of this discussion of school-based mindfulness, and with reference to Foucault's dictum about critique, the trope of neoliberalism has made critique rather easy and unproblematic, but, as highlighted in the above analysis, has also given rise to the dominant strand of reductive interpretations of school-based mindfulness practices. Such interpretations are unable to capture the complexity and multiplicity of practice. As Ergas (2019) argues, the range of implementations and aims of mindfulness practices in education are diverse and complex, thereby disputing interpretations that rely on a monolithic or rigid understanding of the term mindfulness. The neoliberal framing tends to overshadow any educational purposes and intentions teachers might have when applying mindfulness practices; purposes and intentions which do not necessarily correspond to the framing of mindfulness solely as a coping mechanism for students situated in a society conditioned by acceleration.

As an alternative to ideology critique, where the truth is unmasked or debunked based on external criteria, Owen (2002) suggests presenting an alternative picture or representation of the object of critique. This presentation aligns with a deconstructive, critical strategy promoted by Biesta & Stams (2001), because it must always take place within the dominant critical discourse. Here, mindfulness practices and mindfulness

critique that is based on the imperatives of deconstruction and of providing another rivaling picture might have the potential to open new spaces for both practice and theoretical discussion. Drawing on Biesta (2013), one such picture or representation of the educational role of mindfulness might develop from thinking of subjectification as something other than reproducing explicit directions for how or how not to become a subject. This would mean that the form of responsibility promoted through mindfulness is not ‘forced’ upon students, but integrated in such a way as to enable students to take responsibility upon themselves (Biesta, 2013, p. 22). Such an approach rests on the idea that avoiding the seductive instrumentalization of producing subjects and instead striving to create a classroom where ‘new beginnings and new beginners can come into the world’ (2013, p. 4) is among the basic goals of education. With this goal in mind, and within the context of school-based mindfulness, how do we avoid ending up in the same vagueness with regard to how this can be realized in practice as, for example, Purser and Forbes? With reference to the framework introduced by Biesta & Stams (2001), one answer would be to adopt a strategy of not explaining from an external viewpoint what mindfulness supposedly ‘does’ to you. This would allow students themselves to uncover potential uses of mindfulness by actively circumventing the framing of concrete exercises as being about self-development or having a productive goal in general. Another answer could be to transpose the critical lens not by letting go of the link between mindfulness and subjectivity, but by widening the gaze of critical research to include underexposed aspects of school-based mindfulness, for example questions of its educational purposes or the promotion of temporal norms linked to being in the present moment. Whether these steps would result in the emergence of new forms of subjectivity of students remains an open question. And the possibility of such forms of subjectivity not supporting the much-praised policy objectives for introducing

mindfulness into schools in the first place might in the end be a price that few schools are willing to pay.

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