

BEING MINDFUL ABOUT MINDFULNESS

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Recently, I was honored to be invited to a collective gathering of the top thinkers in the nation around the topic of teaching mindfulness in K-12 education. This topic was extremely relevant to me since I serve as the superintendent of the Encinitas Union School District. Our district has been spotlighted nationally for our district wide yoga program and our world ready traits and skills. Being the first school district in the nation to have this district wide curriculum, we have been both celebrated and demonized for our adaption of this powerful set of tools to help teach elementary students about health and wellness.

The gathering was hosted by the University of Virginia's Center for Contemplative Sciences. At the meeting were national leaders in contemplative science, social and emotional learning, yoga, meditation practices, compassionate schools, and overall mindfulness. The gathering was called the K-12 Education Contemplative Institute (since it was hosted by the Center for Contemplative Science) but it quickly became apparent that there was no clear agreement on what was included in this field of study or even what we called the field of study. The running joke throughout the Institute, was our use of the term, "X" to describe our common work. This lack of common understanding of what we do and even what we call what we do has prompted me to try and address these questions in this article.

So why not just use mindfulness? Different scholars define mindfulness differently but most definitions tend to connect mindfulness and its related cousin meditation. To many, mindfulness is more directly applied to the idea of being completely aware of one's external and internal happenings. To be mindful, is to be completely in the moment. Meditation is perceived as being closer to the definition of contemplation or hyper focused on a specific point of reference. Meditation is an extreme form of focus in most definitions. The problem with using mindfulness as the overarching definition is that to many scholars in the field, there is no universal definition for mindfulness. Some scholars attribute some components of health and wellness to a sense of mindfulness but not all. To others, the definition is too broad and ill defined to be used with specificity.

So what other definitions of this topic exist? There is a large body of work already in place in this field. The Center for Contemplative Science at the University of Virginia is a good place to start. Contemplation means profound thinking about something. This idea of deep thinking or reflection is expanded by the Center for Contemplative Science to really address a broader vision of looking at how this deep thinking impacts the personal, inter-personal, intellectual, and greater well being of the individual. To the center, contemplative learning encompasses awareness, meditative practice, and deeper understanding.

If contemplative science is the first school of thought in this area then it is closely followed by the separate but supporting school of thought that houses the social and emotional learning advocates. The leader in this school of thinking is the Center for Academic, Social,

and Emotional Learning (CASEL). CASEL defines social and emotional learning on its website in the following way:

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions.

There are many related partners in this field. Often supporters of social and emotional learning refer to their work as character education, character development, positive behavior management, and a host of closely related terms referencing how students relate and deal with themselves and the outside world.

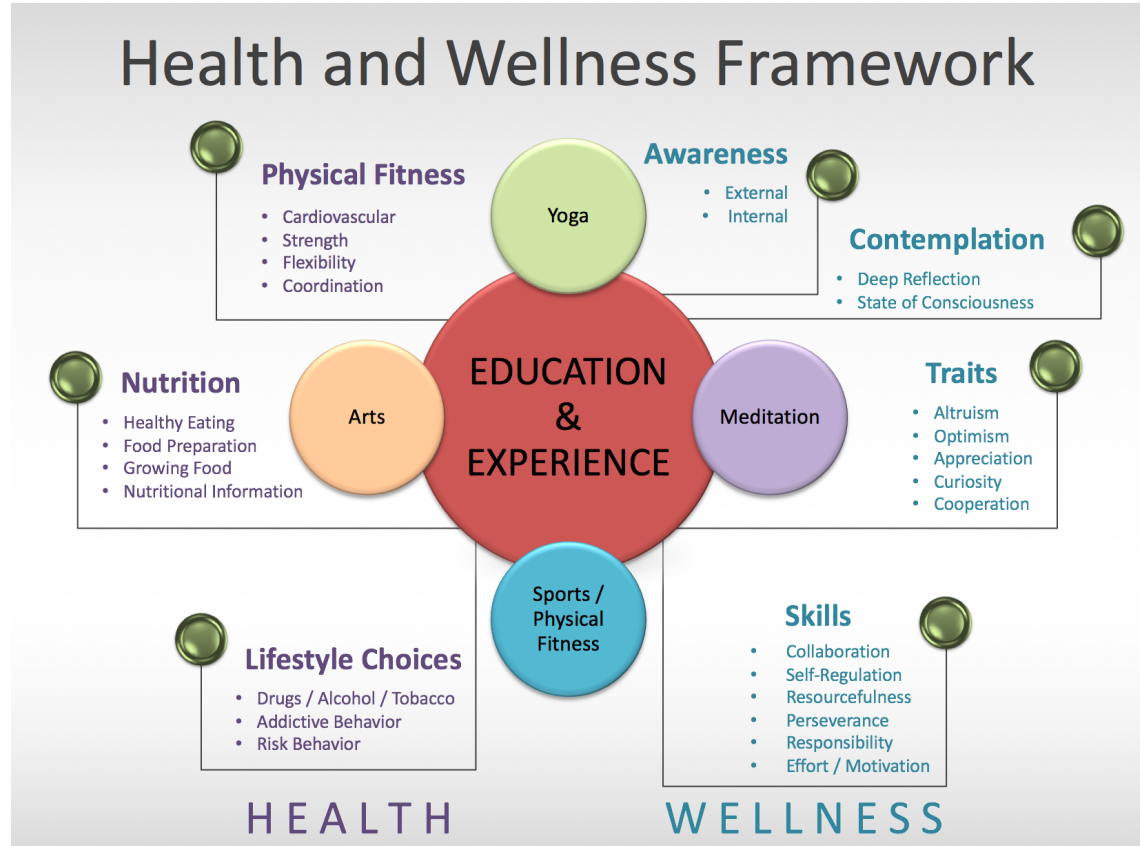
Adding to this conversation are the yoga supporters. Yoga overlaps many of these areas and also has the added benefit of specific physical fitness benefits. Yoga advocates claim that through yoga, all of the other fields mentioned above can be addressed.

Finally, there is a hodgepodge of less developed but no less passionate number of groups that support some combination of these different ideas but with their own emphasis areas. Martial arts supporters, high endurance sports participants, and various advocates of their own version of mindfulness all contribute to the conversation and the confusion surrounding this conversation. So why is this a problem?

As evidenced at our Institute discussion, not having a common understanding of what we are discussing limits our ability to move the field forward. Part of this dilemma is based upon the lack of common language to even hold the discussion. The lack of a model for health and wellness goes deeper than just language, though. Consider that how we define something also determines how we address that issue.

One example comes from the field of education where we have numerous models to discuss learning theory. Webb's Depth of Knowledge model takes a completely different approach to addressing learning than Gardener's Multiple Intelligences model. In Webb's model, the complexity of learning is addressed. Gardener's model focuses on the type of intelligence being stressed. Although they both address cognitive issues, the language and approach differences between the two models are so vast that linking them is almost impossible. So the challenge in addressing all of the issues surrounding mindfulness is not simply one of common naming. The task also requires that any model used must be flexible enough to absorb all of the related concepts and show the connections that hold them together. This was the impetus for developing the Health and Wellness Framework. (See Figure 1)

Figure 1



The Health and Wellness Framework has been developed to show the relationship between Health or the physical components of well-being and Wellness, the mind components of well-being. The model also shows the connectors that tie these two areas together. Obviously, this is a simplification of the mind body experience. Science has shown us that there is a physical component of electrical and chemical stimulation that occurs with everything we do. Therefore by scientific definition, the mind and body really can't be separated. This model is not trying to dispute that understanding but merely attempting to give an overview framework to discuss the overarching and connecting concepts of health and wellness.

HEALTH COMPONENTS

The Health side of the model is articulated through three different strands. These include Physical Fitness, Nutrition, and Lifestyle Choices. This side of the equation is fairly straightforward. Any model focusing on building a healthy lifestyle must include physical fitness. Learning focused on a healthy lifestyle must develop the body's cardiovascular system, strength, flexibility and coordination. Exemplary physical fitness programs use training, sports, and life activities such as swimming or walking to help develop this.

Nutrition is also a key strand in creating a healthy lifestyle. If the body is the machine that physical fitness keeps in tune, then nutrition is the fuel that keeps the body running efficiently. In this strand, learners not only learn about nutritional information but also how food is grown, produced, prepared, and finally consumed in ways that keeps the body healthy and happy.

Finally, Lifestyle Choices must also be considered when talking about a well-being. Here issues such as use of drugs or alcohol, other addictions, and overall risk taking need to be considered. Even when physical fitness and proper nutrition are in place, lifestyle issues often compromise the otherwise healthy individual.

WELLNESS COMPONENTS

The Wellness side of the equation is where much of the debate in this discussion generates. In the Health and Wellness Framework, this is defined through the ACTS of Wellness. (See Figure 2) Here the strands of Awareness, Contemplation, Traits, and Skills come together to give a more complete understanding of how wellness is achieved through different means.

Figure 2

The ACTS of Wellness

WELLNESS =	A	C	T	S
	Awareness	Contemplation	Traits	Skills

All of the different theories surrounding mindfulness include some form of awareness in their understanding. Awareness means simply that one is aware (some would say hyper aware) of internal and external stimuli. In yoga, meditation, and often sports, one begins with this focus of mind and body. Often it starts with being aware of one's breathing or specific physical sensations. This leads to a sense of control over mind and body and often a clearing of the mind or a focusing of the mind. This stage does not denote action, merely perception. To many, this is the primary definition of being mindful. Practitioners who master awareness are able to identify stress within themselves and control it.

Awareness alone is not enough, however. Contemplation or the ability to think deeply is the second stage of wellness. In some ways, contemplation is the opposite of awareness since contemplation essentially denotes a focus away from the immediate internal or external stimuli. Contemplation is more than just thinking about something. It requires intense focus that takes one to a state beyond their immediate surroundings. Through contemplation, we lose the sense of immediate awareness of things around us. Everyone has experienced this at one time or another. Athletes often call this flow or the zone, where your body is responding on it's own and the athlete is in a different world from those around them. This can happen when reading, playing chess, painting, or even daydreaming. When your level of focus takes you away from your immediate state of

awareness, this is contemplation. Often times, creative thought is best achieved through the use of contemplation. The secret here is learning how to use and control contemplation to achieve deeper levels of thinking, greater performance, and deeper focus.

TRAITS

That takes us to traits. In the Health and Wellness Framework, traits have been identified as altruism, optimism, appreciation, curiosity, and cooperation. I used this particular set of traits because that is what we have identified in the Encinitas Union School District. So what are traits and how do they differ from skills? Research points to traits as something more pre-determined in the learner than skills. Consider this the nature versus nurture issue. We all know people who are simply more optimistic or appreciative than their peers. That doesn't mean that someone can't be taught to develop these traits. Indeed, modeling, teaching, and critical feedback can make the learner more aware of these traits and cause a change in someone. How much of a change is up for debate but when we talk about traits, we often use the 80% / 20% framework. Even if traits are embedded so deeply in someone that we can only impact it 20%, then the effort is worth it.

SKILLS

Skills on the other hand are the opposite of traits. These also come predetermined with the learner but skills are much more readily learned than traits. Using the 80% / 20% benchmark again, skills such as perseverance and responsibility are up to 80% trainable despite the predetermination we all bring in these areas. Thus, skills represent the mirror image of traits. In the Encinitas Union School District, we work on traits and skills but much more time and critical feedback is spent on skills since these attributes are more malleable. In fact, these skills are seen as such important components of not only school success but also success in life, that the front page of the Encinitas Union School District report card only highlights these skills.

The ACTS model purposely leaves the concept of social / emotional learning out of the discussion. This is not to imply that social / emotional learning is not important. It is very important but it is represented in other ways in this model. Social / emotional learning elements such as self-awareness and social awareness are really specific instances found in awareness. Determining one's driving emotion and then controlling it are also based primarily on awareness and then concerted thought or contemplation around that awareness. Self-management, responsible decision-making, and relationship skills fall loosely in the traits and skills areas of ACTS. Social / emotional learning is important but can be addressed through the ACTS of Wellness.

CONNECTORS

This leads to the idea of connectors. There are certain behaviors, practices, and experiences that connect the components of health and wellness in specific ways. These connectors become tools that practitioners use to not only go deeper into specific practices of health and wellness but also to link the various components of health with other health components and wellness areas with other wellness areas. Specific connectors can even bridge the health and wellness divide by linking health practices with wellness practices.

One example that stands out is the practice of yoga. Yoga is a connector that supports much of the Health and Wellness Framework. Let's start by reviewing how it supports the Health side of the Framework. The physical movements of yoga are designed to build the practitioner's strength and flexibility through the yoga poses. In some cases, cardiovascular performance is also improved through yoga. This alone is very commendable. Yoga is designed though to also help one develop awareness (particularly internal awareness) and ultimately can lead to deep contemplation.

Meditation or deep reflection is another connector activity often linked with mindfulness. Here, the focus is again on connecting the meditation with deep contemplation. Prayer could be perceived as a specific form of mediation.

Activities such as sports or lifetime activities such as running or swimming are also helpful with physical fitness and on occasion can take the participant into awareness and contemplation. As mentioned earlier this sometimes occurs when the participant is in the zone. It is also observed with high performance athletes that use visualization strategies to preset their performance.

Art has also been used to take the participant into a hyperawareness state (both internally and externally). This awareness can then lead the artist into deep contemplation where they lose themselves in the art. This can be seen both in the creation of art and the appreciation of art.

Education is the glue that can connect all of the areas of the Health and Wellness Framework together. Although physical fitness, awareness, and contemplation must be experienced to truly understand and appreciate, education can teach the learner how and most importantly why these related health and wellness components are important.

In the Encinitas Union School District, we use many of the connectors to achieve these goals. All students in our district receive regular yoga instruction. Here they develop physical fitness and focused practice in awareness and contemplation. Sports, lifetime fitness activities such as running, and art are used to extend this learning and experience. Next students are exposed to a structured educational program, with a specific emphasis on learning about healthy nutrition, positive lifestyle choices, and the traits and skills related to being successful and happy. Through this coordinated approach to teaching healthy habits and the companion ACTS of wellness, we believe that we are equipping our students with the tools they need to be healthy and well.