

Exploring effectiveness of Mindfulness Training Programme: An Investigation of the Perceived Benefits from lenses of Pre-service Teachers

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Abstract:

Mindfulness is the buzz word in the contemporary era due to its emerging positive impact on overall psychological well being across cultures and age groups. At the back drop of strong scientific and neurological evidences, mindfulness is finding its places almost in every sphere and discipline pertaining to human life. In this regard, Education as a process of holistic development also recognizes mindfulness as critical skill for 21st century learners and educators. This paper makes an attempt to study the perceived benefits of mindfulness from the perspective of trainee teachers through a pre-test and post-test comparative analysis of a mindfulness training program. Qualitative and quantitative responses from participants yielded through self-constructed questionnaire throw light at the potential benefits of mindfulness as perceived by trainee teachers on all the dimensions under consideration. Findings of the paper make a strong case of integrating mindfulness as part of the teacher training programmes in a more organic and structured manner.

Keywords: Mindfulness, pre service teachers and perceived benefits

Introduction

Mindfulness has been recognized as one of the most powerful tools for enhancing psychological wellbeing and overall mental health. During the past couple of years, the numbers of researches in the area of mindfulness have grown by leaps and bounds (Gaiswinkler & Unterrainer, 2016). This strong research support is further supplemented with advanced technology and are also making it easier to see the neuro-biological impact of mindfulness on human mind through real time brain imaging scans and advanced sophisticated technology (Tang et al, 2015).

One of the crucial factors behind rise in mindfulness based researches is also contributing to the modern day challenges especially post pandemic situation where mental health has become a critical challenge for many. Technological advancement and knowledge expansion has though has created value in human life but off late has also been causing many mental health issue. Amidst these developments, scholarly work in the area also hints at the widening acceptability and adaptability of mindfulness in diverse areas including health management, leadership building, counseling services, education to name a few (Keng et al, 2011).

Originated from Buddhism, mindfulness is almost 2,500 year old tradition that aims at developing one's ability to focus attention on one's experiences is seen in modern times as important wellness technique of ensuring personal and psychological well-being (Burke, 2010). In its simplest form, Mindfulness is defined as conscious, non-judgmental and uninterrupted awareness of the present moment. (Burke & Hawkins, 2012, Kabat-Zinn, 2003). It signifies moment by moment awareness of individual inner experiences with open-minded curiosity and acceptance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003).

Need of the Study:

One of the pertinent areas where mindfulness is witnessing very strong integration is the area of 'Education' particularly with reference to the cognitive control, social emotional learning and self-awareness and holistic sense of learning. Researchers have also reported that mindfulness practice by school students results in improving attention span, enhanced empathy, acceptance, compassion, self-regulation and refined sense of self identity which is not based on other's perceptions (Burke & Hawkins, 2012; Viafora, Mathiesen, & Unsworth, 2015).

Concerning area of Education, mindfulness is not only useful for students but also for teachers. Mindfulness as a contemplative practice of enhancing one's higher level of awareness requires the practitioner to be totally present in the moment without any form of judgement. The whole idea is to be a detached observer of one's thoughts in the moment, here and now. As the person practices mindfulness, one begins to acknowledge one's imperfections that crop up in numerous forms in human interactions in personal and professional spaces. With an enhanced consciousness and focused attention, overcoming these barriers with balanced and calm state of mind becomes easier. An objective understanding of oneself and the people around make the person more sensitive and considerate towards others. With a sense of equanimity and inner peace, mindfulness allows the teacher in the classroom to respond to situations and people rather than react, to observe

grey areas rather than putting things in black and white. For teachers, it holds significant importance as mindfulness practices have emerged as a vehicle for a systematic training of the mind in the service of developing greater awareness of self and others, and thus, greater understanding of various stakeholders in the field of education.

Taking this forward, mindfulness has been advocated by leading educational agencies worldwide but back in India, there seems to be dearth of ground level researches in education more specially in the area of teacher training. Therefore, it seemed important at this juncture to conduct such study that can explore the impact of mindfulness with reference to pre service teachers who are the important stakeholders in the field of education.

Objectives of the Study:

Objective 1 - To find the effect of mindfulness training session on the pre-service teachers' level of the awareness of the concept of mindfulness.

Objective 2 - To explore the changes in the pre-service teachers' views concerning the practical aspects of mindfulness post the training programme.

Objective 3 - To study the experiences of pre-service teachers while practicing various mindfulness-based techniques as part of the mindfulness training programme.

Research Methodology:

The Present paper is based on an explorative study which intends to find out the overall impact of an intensive mindfulness training programme on pre service teachers level of awareness about the concept of mindfulness both with reference to the theoretical aspects as well as applied aspects through comparison of pre-test and post-test results.

About the Training Programme:

The aforesaid mentioned training program was intensive three days training programme encompassing the discussion-based interactions about the concept of mindfulness and related aspects along with the hands-on sessions on the practice of mindfulness. The programme was conducted by the expert and well established mindfulness trainer, having substantial experience of completing her doctorate in the area and developing two MOOCs in the area of mindfulness at prestigious IIT and UNESCO platform. The sessions spread across three days.

The details of the aforesaid program were as follows:

Day I – Basic concept of Mindfulness and key dimensions

Day II- Myths associated with Mindfulness and orientation to various practices

Day III- Mindfulness for teachers and hands on practice of various mindfulness techniques

Sample of the Study:

The Mindfulness training programme was organized for hundred pre-service teachers pursuing their Diploma in Elementary Education. Participants were from first and second year of the D.El.Ed. programme.

Tool for Data Collection:

The primary tool used for the data collection was self-constructed questionnaire with open ended and closed ended items. This comprehensive questionnaire was used for gathering the both Pre- Test and Post-Test responses. Besides the basic demographic details, following were the major dimensions of the questionnaire.

1. Concept of Mindfulness
2. Dimensions of Mindfulness
3. Applied Aspect in relation to classroom context
4. Misconception about mindfulness
5. Mindfulness based practices
6. Overall experience of practicing various mindfulness through various techniques

Analysis of Data:

The data gathered through the questionnaire had both closed ended and open ended questions. For the systematic analysis of the data as collected through participants, objective wise Data analysis was done. For quantitative data, basic statistical analysis using percentage was carried out and a thematic analysis technique was employed for analysis of qualitative data.

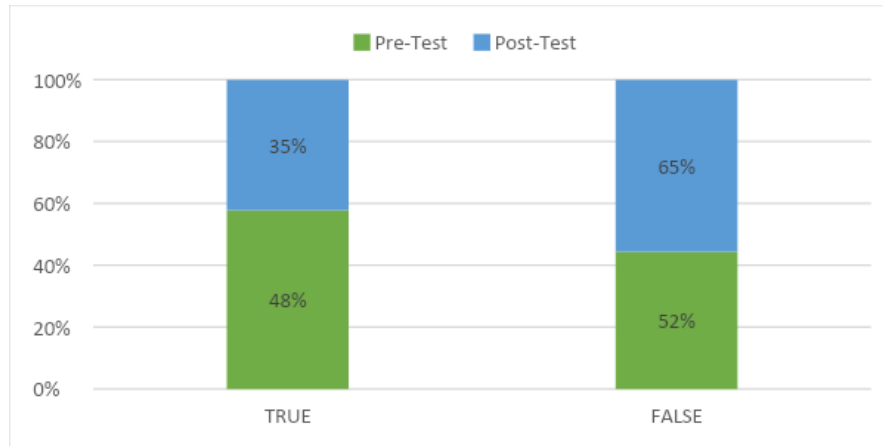
Results and Discussion:

Objective 1

With reference to objective 1, the pre service teachers were asked to share their understanding of the concept of mindfulness. In response to this item, there was a clear noticeable variation in the expressions used by the trainee teachers to convey their ideas. While pre test responses mostly focused on generalized terms like peace of mind, Way of Being Happy and satisfied, being stress free and a form of exercise, the post test responses seemed to be more precise and with accurate vocabulary surrounding the concept of mindfulness. The expression like Attentiveness to the present moment, Being non-judgmental, a type of Meditation etc as part of post-test responses signify much greater depth of understanding as developed after attending the mindfulness sessions.

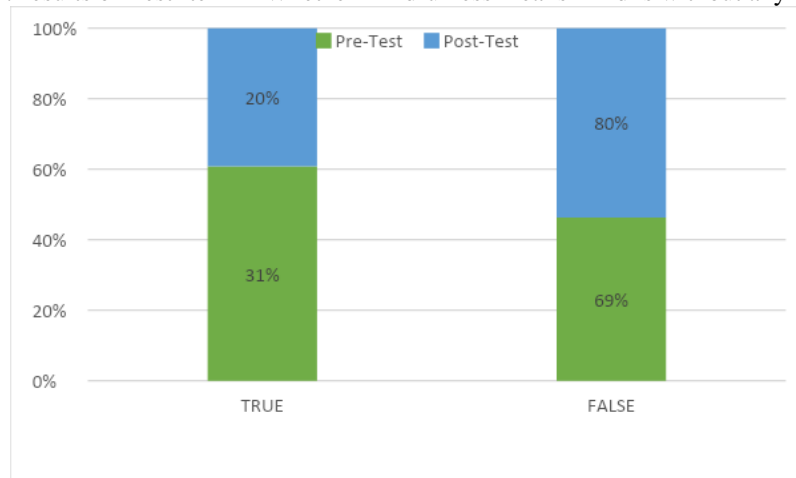
Further on asking whether mindfulness and meditation are the same concepts, 48% of the participants responded in Yes in the pre-test, which is technically incorrect. This percentage dropped down to 35 % in the post test responses that indicate the refined understanding of the concept as gained by the participants. This is further reiterated by the increased percentage of participants from 52% to 65% on the False Category of response again hinting at the clarity of the concept attained by the trainee teachers during the sessions. Graphical presentation of the findings is mentioned below.

Figure1:Results of Test Item1- Whether mindfulness and meditation are the same concepts?



It was further interesting to explore participants' conception of mindfulness in context of its various dimensions. On asking, whether Mindfulness means the mind is without any thoughts, 31 % of the participants agreed with the idea in the pre-test. This percentage went down to 20% in the post test which implies that indeed more trainee teachers got the clarity that Mindfulness is being aware of the thoughts and not being thoughtless. On the same item, the percentage of disagreeing participants also went up from 69% to 80 % that is further reinforcement of the idea.

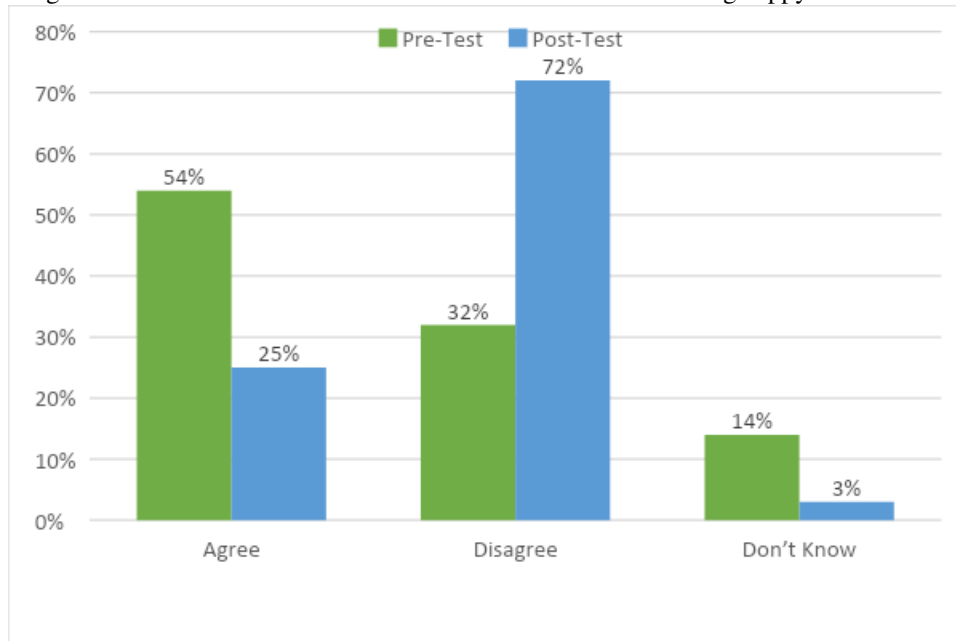
Figure 2:Results of Test Item 2- Whether mindfulness means mind is without any thoughts?



Likewise on a similar type of question, when asked as to whether Mindfulness means being happy all the time, 54% of the respondents agreed with the statement which came down to 25% in post test scores. This signifies the increasing number of trainee teachers getting better clarity on the authentic concept of mindfulness. Also, the number of participants choosing

the 'False' response on this item also sharply increased from 32% to 72%. On an interesting note, number of trainees falling under "Don't know" category has also come down from 14% to 3% as depicted in the diagram below.

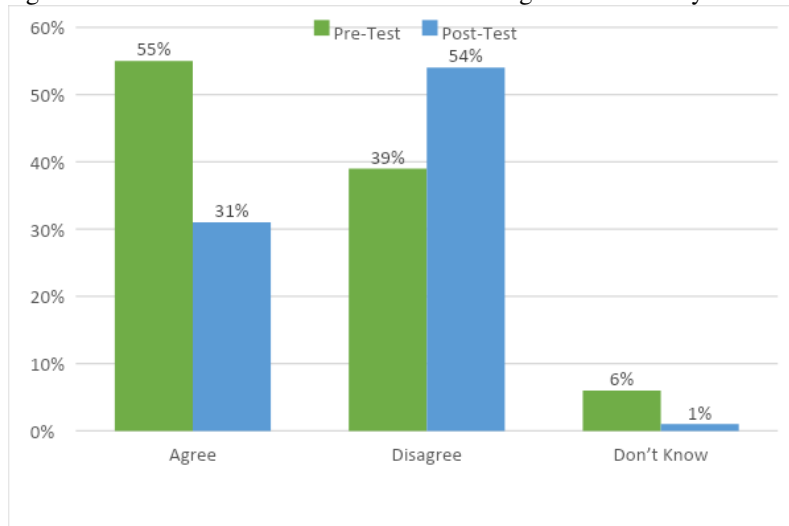
Figure 3: Results of Test Item 3: Whether Mindfulness means being happy all the time?



Objective II

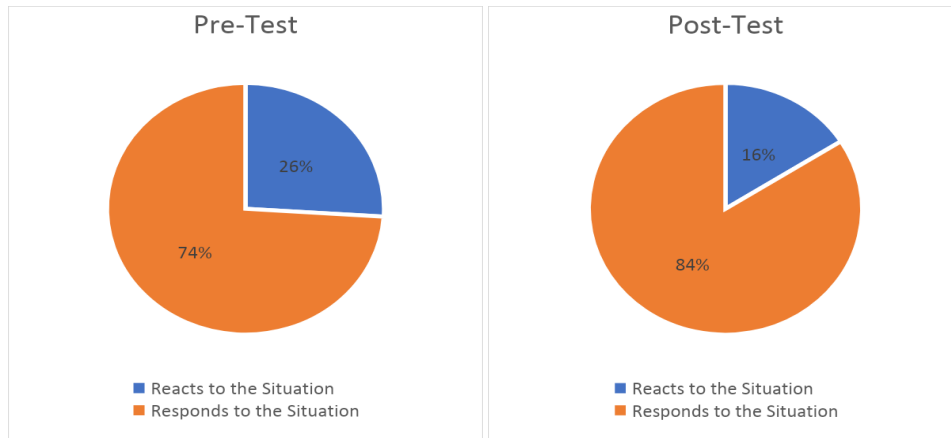
For verifying objective two, which was mainly concerning to explore the changes in the pre-service teachers' views concerning the practical aspects of mindfulness post the training programme, the items of the questionnaire were designed to focus on the evoking the implication based responses. On asking whether Morning time is the only most suitable time for mindfulness practice, only 31% responded agreed with the notion as against 55% in the Pre-test. Similarly, percentage of participants disagreeing with the idea also went up to 54% from 39% of the post-test responses.

Figure 4: Results of Test Item 4: Whether morning time is the only most suitable time for mindfulness practice?



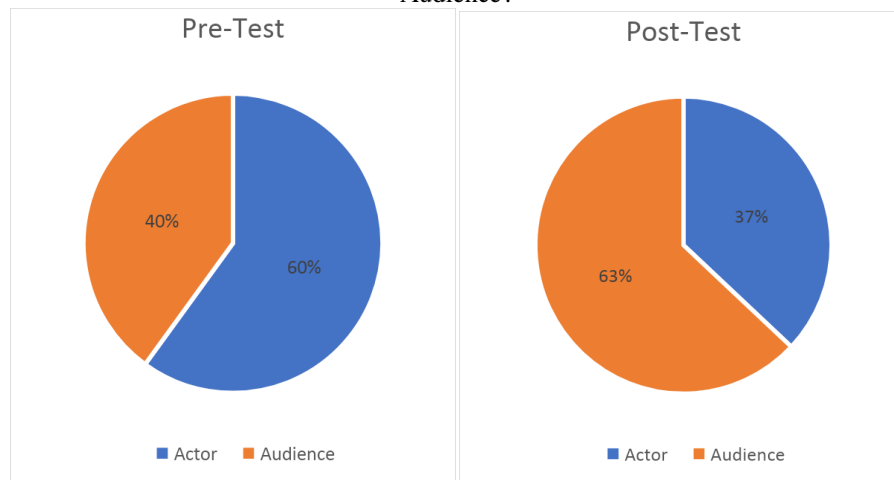
The practical aspect of mindfulness as applied in real life situation was also assessed through the question was also about the Mindful person’s reaction in an unpleasant and challenging situation. In response to this question, about one fourth of the participants choose ‘reacts to the situation’ which came down to only 16 % in post test. Here it is to be observed that these practical insights can be attained only with clarity about the theoretical understanding of the concept. Further in this category itself number of participants choosing for the response ‘Responds to the situation’ also increased from 74% to 84 %.

Figure 5: Results of Test Item 5: In an unpleasant and challenging situation, whether a Mindful person reacts or responds to the situation?



The similar kind of response was being observed on asking the question ‘ If we see our life as a movie, in a state of mindfulness’ 63 % preferred the analogy of being the audience (representing detached observer) in the post test against 40% in the pre-test. For the analogy of the actor (representing complete submersion in the situation without conscious awareness) accounted for only 37% participants response in the post test against 60% in the pre-test.

Figure 6: Results of Test Item 6: If we see our life as a movie, in a state of mindfulness we are more likely to be Actor or Audience?

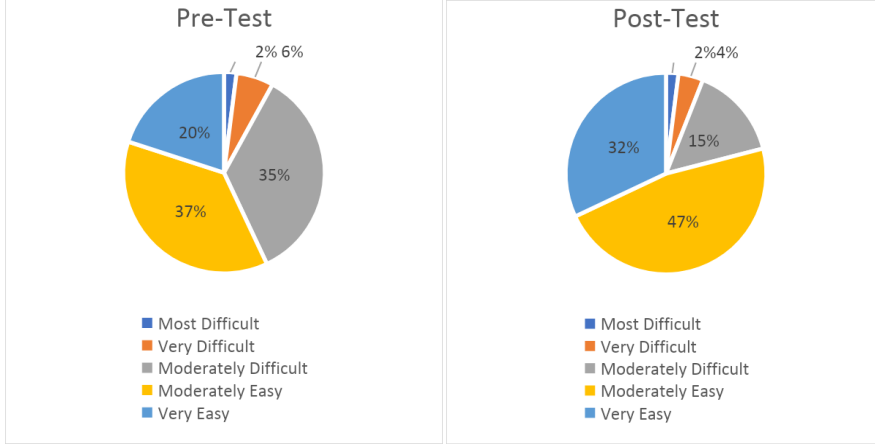


Being the stakeholder from the field of Education, an attempt was also made to explore the trainee teachers’ views about introducing mindfulness in classrooms, for which though there was not much difference observed in Most Difficult and Very Difficult category of response in pre-test and post-test but rest of the three categories, there was a very significant variation observed.

For instance, 35 % of the participants were of view that it is moderately difficult to introduce mindfulness in classroom. This number at the end of eh program came down to only 15%, probably giving required confidence to the respondents. Similarly for moderately easy category of response the percentage in post increased to 47% from 37% of pre-test response

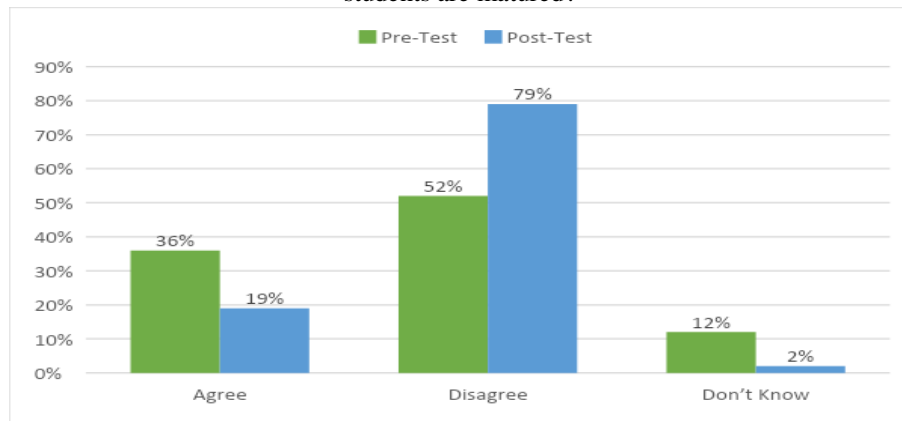
rate. The similar trend was also being observed for ‘very easy’ category of responses for which the 20% of the respondents increased to 32% in the post test score. The compile Likert scale response percentage for all the five categories are summarized below.

Figure 8: Results of Test Item 8: Introducing Mindfulness in classrooms is _____.



On the last question, for this objective, wherein the participants were asked whether Mindfulness must be introduced in schools only after a particular age when students are matured, only 19% responded in yes as against 36% in the pre-test indicating much willingness and acceptance on the part of the participants of the fact that mindfulness is not an age bound phenomenon. This stand also finds its expression when no of disagreeing participants rose from 79% to 52 % on the same item. Interestingly only 2% of the trainee teachers replied in ‘Don’t know’ category at the end of the session against 12 % in the pre-test scores.

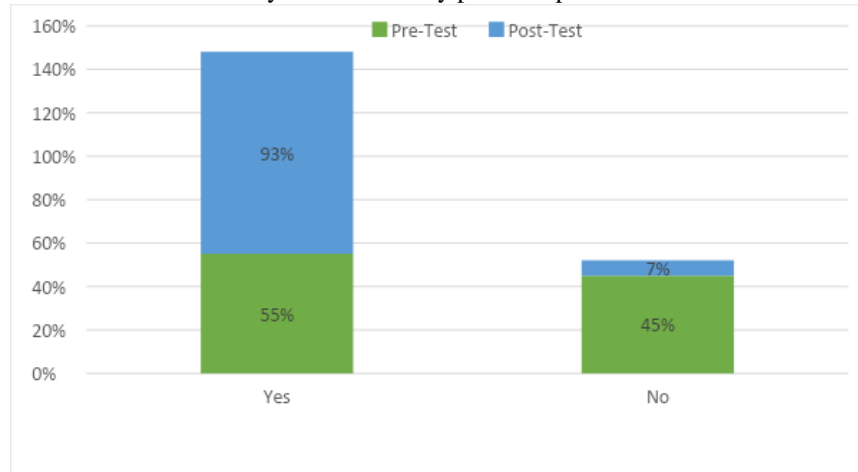
Figure 9: Results of Test Item 9: Whether Mindfulness must be introduced in schools only after a particular age when students are matured?



Objective III

As part of objective three which aimed at exploring the experiences of Pre-service teachers of practicing various mindfulness-based techniques, many insightful findings emerged. To begin with, on the question of awareness of various kinds of mindfulness based practices, impact of mindfulness training programme was clearly visible. Whereas about half of the participants said that they are aware of mindfulness-based practices in the Pre-test, post mindfulness programme this percentage went up to whopping 93%. Similar trend was observed asked about the participants who do not know about mindfulness based practices. Whereas in Pre-test, the percentage of these participants was 45%, this number came down to just 7 % after attending the mindfulness training programme.

Figure10: Results of Test Item 10: Are you aware of any practice/ practices useful for enhancing Mindfulness?



This finding in particular is further substantiated when participants were asked to share different mindfulness based practices, they are aware of. In response to this question, only specific terms like Meditation, Yoga, Breathing exercise came up where as in Post test response trainee teachers depicted very comprehensive idea various mindfulness based practices and they responses made use of diverse terms namely Mindful breathing, Mindful walking, Mindfulness through music, Mindful eating, Mindfulness with nature, Body scanning, Mindfulness through journaling etc. Further it was also observed that the response of the some of the participants which was in a way vague and that of layman in the pre-test, for instance silence and self introspection, took more precise shape and they conveyed their enhanced knowledge through very specific and technical vocabulary for conveying difference mindfulness practices they were aware of.

Interestingly, as part of these intensive mindfulness sessions, participants had number of hands-on sessions each day to get the real time experience of being in the mindful state. With the objective of getting an idea about their learning of these hands on sessions, one of the questions asked the participants about sharing their overall learning from the Sessions on Mindfulness. In response to this question, many insightful observations in the form of participants' narratives came up. These narratives were much elaborated and quiet insightful. While describing the experience, one of the participants wrote,

“From these sessions which have been attended by me, I learnt how can I be fully present and also be aware of where exactly we are in this moment. Also, now I now, how to really respond to the situation without reacting to it, of course it is a slow and gradual process”.

Another interesting response from one of the trainees was,

“In the mindfulness session, we learnt about Mindfulness. Mindfulness means a state of being aware of the present moment with full attention, without any judgment. We also learnt about the implications of mindfulness, Explored mindfulness-based practices, Core dimensions of mindfulness, Application of mindfulness and Educational implications of mindfulness.”

On a similar note, other participants expressed the perceived benefits of the programme with following words;

“I learnt quiet a lot many things, for instance about the basic concept of mindfulness and how mindfulness makes us live in the moment and make sense of it. It is not that difficult to learn this art and leave happily in our day to day life. Most

interesting part was knowing the ways to integrate mindfulness in classrooms, mini mindfulness along with the difference between mindfulness and meditation.”

“The session was filled with happiness and calmness. We observe and learn how to keep ourselves, mindful person. I'd no idea about mindfulness practices except mindful breathing, I knew them. There are so many activities which we can use adapt in our daily life to be mindful”.

Few more prominent responses were as follows;

“I got to know a lot from today's session and I have learnt that there is more than one way to practice mindfulness, but the goal of any mindfulness technique is to achieve a state of consciousness”.

“Today Mindfulness session was awesome. It was so knowledgeable and I learnt the difference between meditation and mindfulness because I used to think that mindfulness and meditation both are same concept. I also learnt that as a mindful person, we have to be non-judgmental. Through Mindfulness activities, we live a very happy life and healthy life”.

An important point to mention here is that the trainee teachers also recognized the importance of integrating mindfulness in the classroom in general and in teacher training programmes in particular. and this advocacy is manifested through the following narratives;

“Mindfulness means being aware of the place where we are and what we are doing. A mindful person always finds a solution to every situation in an easier way. A responsible teacher should teach her students the ways to be able to cope with every situation and to keep calm. Mindfulness activities are-Meditation -Smelling the flowers. -Knowing nature”.

“I got to learn that mindfulness is basically awareness. It is very necessary for teaching in the classroom”.

“I learnt a lot of things to concentrate on the present by focusing or mindfulness. It's very useful to feel free and calm. As it helps in learning, reading or expressing new ideas or thoughts”.

On a very reflective note, one respondent also recognized the importance of mindfulness as expressed through the following narrative;

“In this pandemic situation, mindfulness is the best concept we must learn and try to relax our mind (body) through various activities”.

With reference to the stated set of findings, we can draw logical inferences from the data as represented in various modes. The detail interpretation is discussed in the following section.

Interpretation of results:

This study encompasses the pre service teachers' experience of being part of mindfulness training programme and the resultant effects on their awareness levels of the concept of mindfulness both in its theoretical as well as practical aspects. In light of the findings of this study, it is quite evident that there is a significant number of participants who responded of an enhanced level of awareness and the understanding of mindfulness as a result of attending the training programmes. Further, it was quite apparent from the percentage analysis in terms of comparison of pre and post test scores that apart from knowledge dimensions the trainee teachers also acquired a reasonably satisfactory exposure to various practical techniques of practicing mindfulness. Infact, the narratives shared by the participants are the validation of the stated findings and the authentic expression of the benefits of training programme as perceived by pre-service teachers.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of the study and in line with a very strong research evidence supporting role of mindfulness in ensuring holistic development of human beings, the following key recommendations needs strong consideration and further deliberation.

- Considering growing awareness among the future teachers about the concept of mindfulness, more and more opportunities must be created in this direction so as to facilitate incorporation of mindfulness into the teaching learning

experiences across all levels. Since the findings of the studies provide strong indication towards the effectiveness of intensive short duration training programme in the area of mindfulness, similar programme can be organized as part of the formal curriculum of the teacher education programme so that the budding teachers can be equipped with desired tools and skill set in the area.

- The study also brings into light, the need for equipping the trainee teachers as mindfulness trainer not only as a capacity building imitative for themselves but also for the learners, they will be teaching in future. As a 21st century critical skill, mindfulness must be among the desired competency for any teacher to enter into the profession like other crucial skills. For this a very systematic orientation, planning and curriculum designing must be initiated seeking the inputs from experts and stakeholders.
- Findings of this study also calls for a more proactive approach from policy makers so as to make mindfulness, part of teacher training curriculum not for name sake but in a more integrated and meaningful way so as to make the future teachers truly humane and reflective practitioners.
- Role of a visionary and transformational leadership can never be undermined for incorporating initiatives like these where the larger goal of actualization of human potentials through mindfulness must be realized in action and spirit by the leaders of the institutions so that such actions are encouraged and find their proper space in the overall system
- Indiabeing the land of wisdom tradition, encouragement of mindfulness-based initiative will be a very important step as a way of reconnecting with our rich heritage of contemplative practices. Teacher being the torch bearer, if trained to learn mindfulness, will be the real agent for transmission of cultural ethos and values especially concerning mindfulness tradition of India.

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