

DEVELOPING A CULTURE OF MINDFUL LEARNING: CHALLENGES, BENEFITS, AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Abstract. *Learning is an individual process for each student. People can be aware of own learning or do not think about it at all in the diverse situations of life. However, in the pedagogical reality, the awareness of students' learning is essential as it contributes to self-regulation of behaviour and self-reflection of actions, striving towards continuous self-development. It is important to be aware of oneself mentally and physically, understanding and accepting own thoughts or feelings. The integration of all areas of personal development becomes relevant, as changes in one area are linked to changes in another. Awareness of own learning directs the learner towards the social, emotional and academic dimension, including not only awareness of the knowledge and acquired skills, but awareness of own goals, motivations, emotions, interests, the personal relevance of the learning content and also the variability of the current situation, strategies for future learning, and other elements of the learning process. Mindfulness can also be seen as a powerful 'antidote' to common mental health problems, e.g. fatigue, exhaustion, apathy, anxiety and difficulty in concentrating. Mindfulness practices can be implemented at schools as an element of the lesson, but it is also important to purposefully create a culture of mindfulness at the institutional level, which can be greatly facilitated by the professional development of teachers. Mindfulness is a mental state of being reflective in the present moment. It provides the ability to live intensely in the present moment, acceptance of own thoughts and feelings, a sense of perspective and the ability to cope with stressful situations through conscious concentration. The aim of this publication is to analyze the theoretical aspects of mindfulness, the possibilities of facilitating the learning process through mindfulness practices, as well as to carry out empirical research evaluating 16-19-year-old students' self-awareness skills, the phenomenon of the presence of mindfulness in their learning process and its impact on their learning outcomes.*

Keywords: *mindfulness, mindful learning, mindfulness practice, positive changes, self-awareness skills, self-regulation, student's personal growth.*

Introduction

Learning occurs continuously throughout our lives. However, to bring positive change in the person's life, and to contribute to positive change in the society, there is a need for personal significance of the learning process (Fink,

2013). Thus, guiding the learner towards the identification of personal learning goals, interests, motivation and learning needs gain importance. Not only measuring students' learning through assessment becomes pedagogically relevant, but also learner's understanding of own learning process and the ways its productivity should be enhanced.

Teaching activities in the lesson often are focused on cognitive processes, including acquiring the learning content of particular subject and preparation for the tests, while social and emotional learning (ability to recognize and regulate emotions, development of skills, e.g. problem-solving skills, having positive relationships with others, etc. (Zins & Elias, 2007)), is often called the *missing component* of the lesson. Social and emotional learning (SEL) and positive environment gains importance in bringing mindfulness to the learning process. Mindfulness, which leads to awareness and acceptance of the present (Bishop, Lau, Shapiro, Carlson, Anderson, & Carmody, 2004), and SEL, which includes the development of essential life skills, e.g. self-confidence, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills and responsible decision-making (Gayl, 2018), have become important tools for the 21st century education as students have to learn to slow down as the speed of the technology that they will use in their lifetime “is beyond the comprehension” (Mussey, 2019, 17).

Recent research has revealed significant impact of the social-emotional environment on learning outcomes as well. The harmful effects of various factors such as poverty; various forms of violence; intoxicants; environmental toxins; etc., which can lead to the risks to brain development, can also be highlighted (Osher, Cantor, Berg, Steyer, & Rose, 2018). Learning supporting environment provides a sense of belonging, healthy relationships and positive emotions. It is also important that the teacher believes that all students have the capacity to learn, however, learning process is individual and depends on experience, relationships and environment of each student. It is also important to recognise that the learning process is not uniform or linear: it is individual and each student's actions have their own strengths and weaknesses (Osher et al., 2018). Cantor, Osher, Berg, Steyer & Rose, (2018) in their research “*Malleability, plasticity, and individuality: How children learn and develop in context*” highlight the plasticity of the human brain, its openness to change and the magnitude of the impact of human experience on brain flexibility, which is far more influential than it was thought previously. This accentuates the importance of SEL, mindfulness practice, learning-supporting environment, teacher's belief that each student can be successful, as well as the awareness of own learning needs and progress.

Immordino-Yang, Darling Hammond, & Krone (2018) compare learning to a social exercise, putting a particular emphasis on how learning can be enhanced or impaired by students' emotional experiences. While high levels of emotional distress and social conflicts can delay student's state of readiness for cognitive activity. Physical development, social development and emotional development

are also important milestones in students' cognitive development. Mussey (2019) defines mindfulness as the state of being aware of own physical, social, and emotional space. The integration of these developmental areas become relevant as the changes in one area are linked to the changes in the other.

A well-organised and stimulating learning environment is important for all children, but especially for those who face poverty and other challenges outside the classroom (Turkheimer, Haley, Waldron, d'Onofrio, & Gottesman, 2003). A teacher can create learning-supporting environment in a conscious and meaningful way for students' development or can be unaware of the importance of the environment and ignore the vital role of environmental conditions.

Behavioural problems and learning difficulties often emerge during adolescence, which can sometimes be described as '*typical adolescent behaviour*' that *will somehow pass with the time* (Kaufman, 2019). Learning is a choice, although each person learns and develops differently depending on gender, biological, genetic, cultural, environmental, social and other factors. Students make very important decisions every day, including the choice of subjects, e.g. advanced courses in grade 12, as well as their future career and university choices. The decisions they make in their daily lives can have a positive, or conversely a negative, impact on the rest of their lives.

Learning can occur consciously and unconsciously. Awareness of own learning facilitates self-reflection and self-regulation, including self-regulation of emotions. Mindfulness: recognizing and accepting their present thoughts and emotions, can be seen as an 'antidote' to common mental health problems such as anxiety and concentration difficulties. Mindfulness practices can also be implemented in schools as an element of the lesson, but it is important to create a culture of mindfulness at schools, which can be greatly facilitated by the development of teacher's professional competence. Mindful learning is directed towards the social, academic and emotional dimensions, involving not only thinking about the knowledge and skills acquired, but also awareness of one's own goals, motivations, emotions, interests, the personal relevance of the learning content and also the variability of the current situation, strategies for future learning, etc.

The aim of this publication is to analyse the theoretical aspects of mindfulness, the possibilities of facilitating the learning process through mindfulness practices, as well as to carry out empirical research evaluating 16-19-year-old students' self-awareness skills, the phenomenon of the presence of mindfulness in their learning process and its impact on their learning outcomes. The research methods were: the analysis of scientific and methodological literature; data gathering method: survey and data processing and analysis methods: quantitative data processing with data mathematical statistical analysis and predictive analytics methods and quantitative data interpretation.

Mindful learning culture: opportunities for its promotion

A student does not have to adopt or conform to the interests and goals of others, but changing and developing, in close collaboration with the teacher and peers, becoming aware of own values, interests, motivation to learn, set personally meaningful goals and become aware of the uniqueness of other people (Rogers, 1961, 21). However, the first step of becoming mindful is becoming aware of own goals, values, interest, motivation and uniqueness.

Gayl (2018) emphasizes the necessity to focus on all three dimensions of the learning process - social, academic and emotional, highlighting that the important aspects of social, academic and emotional learning are: student-centred learning; positive communication; student choice and responsibility for learning; support and positive attitudes; cooperative learning strategies; the balance between self-directed learning and cooperative learning; self-reflection and self-assessment; the belief that everyone can be successful in learning and competency-based learning.

Mussey (2019) emphasizes: “The world needs mindfulness. (..) We must learn to pause in the midst of the dizzying chaos of our lives and ask, *What is going on here? How are things going? How are you? How am I?*” (Mussey, 2019). Mindful learning can be characterized by setting goals and being aware of the obstacles in the process of achieving them. Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs (2012) believe that people who are more likely than others to identify and overcome obstacles to achieving their goals also have better self-awareness skills, which include managing own emotions and reactions. Bishop et al. (2004) stresses that the definition of mindfulness is awareness and acceptance of the present. It is a state of being in the present moment. It gives a sense of perspective, acceptance of one's thoughts and feelings, the ability to live in the moment and the ability to cope much better with stressful situations. It is necessary to be aware of oneself mentally and physically, understanding and accepting own thoughts or feelings. It is also important to understand that situations, thoughts and feelings change - like inhaling and exhaling. Mussey (2019) compares mindfulness with “an intentional state of doing nothing”, a moment when person is “aware of physical, social, and emotional space” (Mussey, 2019, 15). While Duval & Wicklund (1972) emphasize that self-awareness is a state in which a person becomes the object of one's own attention. However, not only individual self-awareness traits (focusing on oneself, one's feelings, thoughts and behaviour), but also public image (tendency to focus on how a particular individual is perceived by society, e.g. one's public image, appearance) can be manifested (Fenigstein, Scheier, & Buss, 1975).

Kaufman (2019) names the main benefits of mindfulness, which are: stress reduction; understanding of the variability of the situation; awareness of own goals, motivation, learning progress and needs, etc.; changing response to a

stressful situation; improving concentration skills; fostering creativity, empathy and compassion; improved relations; reducing concerns about the future; strengthening and training the brain: the human brain is an organ that changes and constantly restructures based on experience (neuroplasticity).

Today, the importance of mindfulness practices is driven by the fast pace of life, constant change, and the shift in emphasis from face-to-face communication to an internet-based form of communication. These factors can contribute to negative outcomes, e.g. addictions, unhealthy eating habits, sleep deprivation, ignoring mental and physical signs of stress. Mindful learning involves focusing on the thoughts and emotional reactions that arise in each moment. During mindfulness practice, the mind is simultaneously relaxed and attentive. Through continuous mindfulness practice, students learn to focus on the task, without allowing the mind to be distracted or diverted. This practice creates a state of calm, giving students a new perspective and facilitating thinking about learning (López-González, Amutio, Oriol, & Bisquerra, 2016). Similarly, a number of researchers (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014) have demonstrated the usefulness of mindfulness practices for activating students' inner resources and potential. However, some of the most important benefits of mindfulness practice are: improved concentration and self-control of emotions (Kaufman, 2019). Mindfulness practices also help develop problem-solving skills, as problems may seem unsolvable only at a given moment, but once we accept the idea that things are changing, we start looking for solutions, as it is the awareness of the problem, which is crucial. Similarly, with stress, which can sometimes seem impossible to escape. Through mindfulness practices, people also become less judgmental of others (Kaufman, 2019, 8). Mindfulness practice involves focusing on: breathing, which reduces feelings of stress and anxiety; breathing exercises, which become especially important when preparing for tests or exams; switching off smart devices; concentration: paying attention to sounds and thoughts to begin to calm and focus the mind; self-awareness: becoming aware of own goals, motivation, interests, values, etc.; compassion, which promotes emotional intelligence and well-being and kindness, focusing on understanding oneself and others; stress reduction (Kaufman, 2019, 23).

It can be concluded that although distress, poverty, various forms of violence, addictive substances, social conflicts, etc. can delay student's state of readiness for cognitive activity, awareness of the problem is crucial, because people who identify and overcome obstacles to achieving their goals, have better self-awareness skills. Mindfulness, which leads to awareness and acceptance of the present, occurs intentionally. It also develops ability to set achievable goals, self-confidence, self-management, social awareness, interpersonal skills and responsible decision-making.

Empirical research findings

The aim of the survey was to evaluate the connections between 16-19-year-old students' self-awareness skills (managing own emotions and reactions), the phenomenon of the presence of mindfulness in their learning process (setting goals and being aware of the obstacles in the process of achieving them (Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012); coping with negative stressors, acceptance of one's thoughts and feelings (Mussey, 2019); awareness of own goals, motivation, learning progress and needs, etc., improving concentration skills (Kaufman, 2019, 13-21)) and their impact on learning outcomes. Predictive analytics methods were implemented through processing SPSS (*Statistical Package for the Social Sciences*). There were semi-open questions in the questionnaire: *Are you aware of your goals in your teaching?; Have you thought about why you study?; Have you ever been in a situation where you didn't set a higher goal because you weren't sure you would achieve it?; Do you have difficulty concentrating on a particular activity during your studies?; Have you ever been in a situation where a problem seemed unsolvable to you?; How safe do you feel in the school environment?; To what extent do your classmates show respect for each other?; To what extent do teachers show respect?*. There were also Likert scale questions: *To what extent do you agree with the statement (the assessment was being done using Likert scale: from 1 strongly disagree-10 strongly agree):*

- *Learning is my choice;*
- *I know how I can learn more effectively;*
- *Going to school is more important to my parents than to me;*
- *I try to avoid extra study work.*

Descriptive statistics:

There were 53 (47.7%) male students and the number of respondents was 111 (15-19 years-old students). All the respondents study in one secondary school of Liepāja (Latvia). Most of the respondents (81.9%) indicated that they are thinking about the reasons why they are learning. Respondents mostly agreed with the statement that they feel safe at school (the median of 7 (range 1-10)) and that learning process is their choice is (the median of 7 (range 1-10)).

Analytical statistics:

The Mann Whitney U test indicates that the respondents who admit knowing why they learn are more likely to think about learning on the daily basis (the median of 7 (range 1-10)) than respondents who do not know why they learn (the median of 5 (range 1-10)), which highlights thinking about learning and mindfulness practices in the goal-setting process.

The Mann Whitney U test also indicates that the respondents who have experienced a situation in which they did not set a higher goal because of their lack of the confidence in their ability to achieve it, were more likely to say they

know why they are learning (the median of 7 (range 1-10)) than respondents who have not experienced this situation (the median of 6 (range 1-10)). The authors of the publication believe that this can be the result of self-regulated learning and presence of mindful learning, which can be characterized by setting achievable goals and being aware of the drawbacks in the process of achieving them (Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012). This include thinking about own learning goals and the own ability and capacity to reach them. Theoretical research also highlights that people who are more likely than others to identify obstacles to achieving their goals, have better self-awareness skills as well (Hofmann, Baumeister, Förster, & Vohs, 2012).

Spearman's rank correlation reveals that agreement with the statement that the respondent clearly knows his/her learning goals correlates with the statement that the respondent does not face concentration difficulties in the learning process ($\rho=0.342$; $p<0.001$) (see Figure 1). Kaufman (2019) emphasizes that one of the main benefits of mindfulness is the improvement of concentration skills.

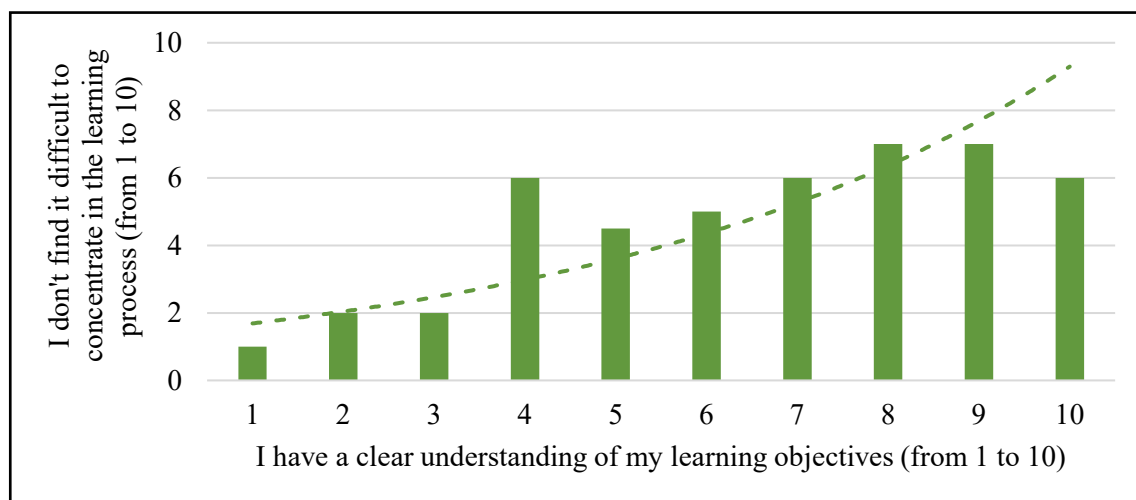


Figure 1 Data collection on the understanding of own learning goals and the possibility of concentration difficulties in the learning process (N=111) (made by Authors)

Theoretical analysis shows the necessity of positive emotional environment in the process of bringing mindfulness to the learning (Bishop et al, 2004), thus developing problem-solving skills as well (Zins & Elias 2007). The empirical analysis reveals the close link between positive emotional background, mindfulness and development of problem-solving skills: Spearman's rank correlation showed that students' feeling safe at school correlates with the statement that the respondent does not face situations which seem unsolvable ($\rho=0.221$; $p=0.024$) (see Figure 2).

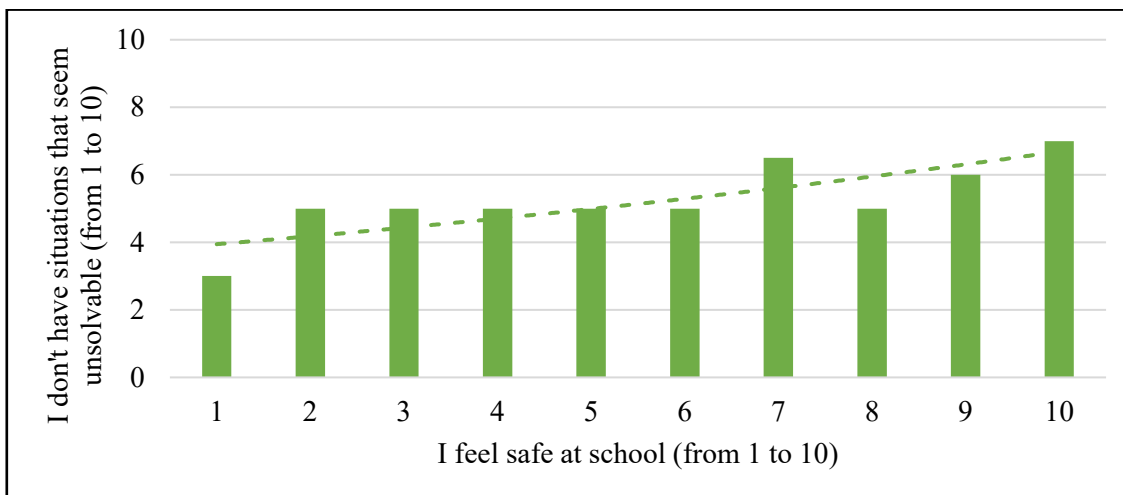


Figure 2 **Data collection on the attitude towards the unsolvable situations and feeling safe at school (N=111) (made by Authors)**

Mindfulness practice promotes healthy relationships (Kaufman, 2019, 13-21). Empirical research shows the connection between having healthy relationship and respondents' feeling safe at school: Spearman's rank correlations reveal a three-way correlation. Respondents' respect towards classmates correlates with respondents' respect towards teachers ($\rho=0.424$; $p<0.001$) and respondents' respect towards classmates correlates with the respondents' feeling safe at school ($\rho=0.346$; $p<0.001$), as well as the statement that respondents' are respected by teachers correlates with the statement that the respondents feel safe at school ($\rho=0.315$; $p=0.001$).

Spearman's rank correlation revealed that agreement with the statement that learning is the respondent's choice correlates with the statement that the respondent does not face situations that seem unsolvable ($\rho=0.201$; $p=0.040$) (see Figure 3).

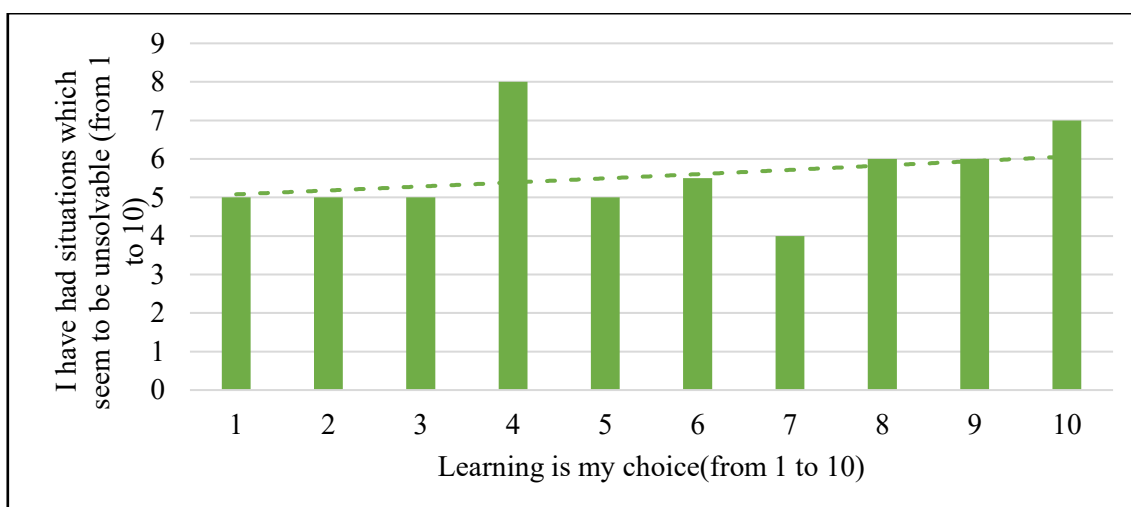


Figure 3 **Data collection on the agreement with the statement that learning is the respondent's choice and the attitude towards the unsolvable situations (N=111) (made by Authors)**

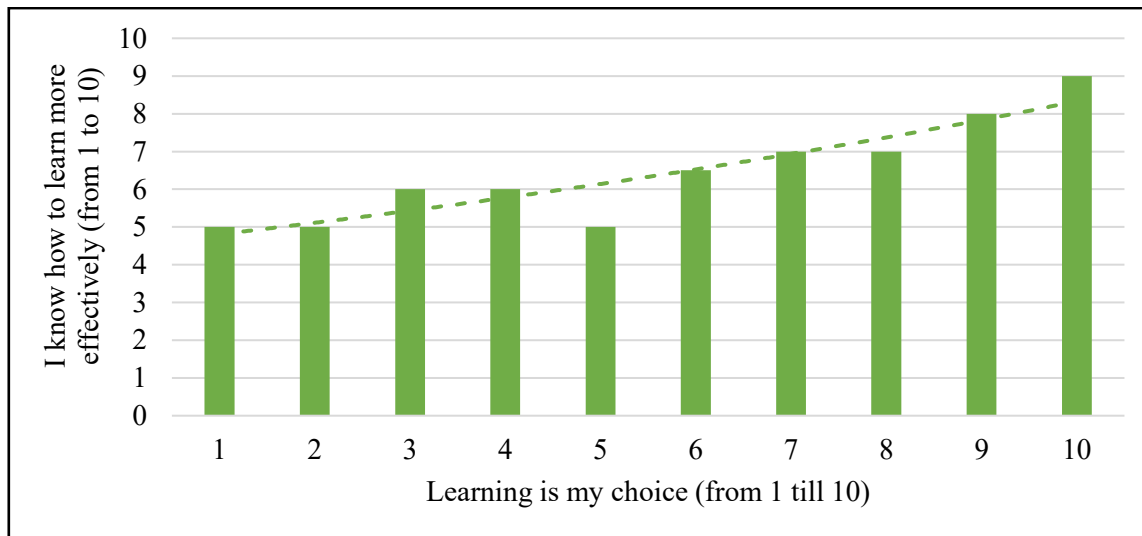


Figure 4 Data collection on the agreement with the statement that learning is the respondent's choice and knowing how to learn more effectively (N=111) (made by Authors)

Spearman's rank correlation revealed that agreement with the statement that learning is a choice of the respondent correlates with the statement that the respondent knows how to learn more effectively ($\rho=0.440$; $p<0.001$) (see Figure No.4). While Gayl (2018) emphasizes the importance of student choice to implement all three dimensions of the learning process - social, academic and emotional.

Conclusions

Learning, which leads to personal development is based on respectful relationships and expectations and free from emotional violence. Learning can be described as a set of choices: decisions students make, which can have a positive, or conversely a negative impact on the rest of their lives. However, are students always aware of the choices they make and their consequences?

Mindfulness is a mental state of being reflective in the present moment and the acceptance of the present as well. Mindful learning activates students' inner resources and potential; improves attention and concentration; planning and self-regulation skills; reduces emotional reactivity; behavioural problems; anxiety and depression, so that students have fewer potential barriers to learning. Mindful learning can be promoted by implementing mindful practices in the learning process. Mindfulness practice involves breathing exercises; switching off smart devices; concentration and self-awareness activities, e.g. becoming aware of own goals, motivations, interests, values, etc.

Creating a culture of mindfulness at the institutional level can be greatly facilitated by learner's understanding of own learning process and the ways its productivity should be enhanced. However, learning process is not uniform or linear: it is individual as each person learns and develops differently.

The survey analysis highlights that the respondents who admit knowing why they learn are more likely to think about learning on the daily basis and face less concentration difficulties, which are one of the main benefits of mindfulness. The respondents who have experienced a situation in which they did not set a higher goal because of their lack of the confidence in their ability to achieve it, were more likely to say they know why they are learning than respondents who have not experienced this situation, which can be the result of mindfulness in their learning process, thus, setting achievable goals and being aware of the drawbacks in the process of achieving them. The empirical analysis also reveals the close link between positive emotional background, having healthy relationships with peers and teachers, mindfulness in the learning process and development of problem-solving skills.

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