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“NOTICE HOW YOU FEEL” AND “TRAIN YOUR BRAIN”

Mindfulness meditation as a technology of the self in education

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Introduction

Imagine yourself at the entrance to a magical garden. As you open the door, you see bright flowers of every colour, tall trees gently swaying in the breeze, and a clear endless sky above. It's a special place where you can feel calm and relaxed. Now imagine that this garden lies at the foot of a majestic mountain. Visualize its grandeur, with towering peaks that touch the sky. Feel the solid ground beneath your feet, connecting you to the mountain's strength and stability. Take time to observe the mountain's surroundings. Observe the lush greenery, the waterfalls, and the serene sounds of nature. This is your sanctuary of peace, a place of tranquility and inner calm. As you contemplate the mountain, you feel a sense of awe and inspiration. Now imagine yourself beginning to climb the mountain. Step by step, you rise. Notice the cool breeze against your skin and the caressing warmth of the sun on your face. Each step brings you closer to a greater sense of serenity. As you ascend, notice the breathtaking views before you. Take time to appreciate the beauty that surrounds you – the immensity of the landscape, the luxurious valleys, and the endless sky. When you reach the summit, find a comfortable place to rest and admire the panorama. Close your eyes and let the calm and serenity of the mountain wash over you. Breathe deeply and allow yourself to be overcome by a sense of peace. Imagine a warm, golden light beginning to shine in your chest. This golden light represents gratitude and love. Feel it spreading from your chest, flowing to all parts of your body and filling you with a sense of happiness and love. Now, you are one with the mountain: rooted and resilient...

It is a bright Monday morning in the primary school section of an international school located in an urban region of Switzerland. Eight-year-old children sit or lie on benches, carpets, or on the floor of the colourfully decorated classroom. Most of them have shut their eyes, some move slightly, and the general feeling emanating from the scene is one of a peaceful moment of relaxation. A female voice speaking in slow monotone conjures up images and sensations related to mountain scenery while eventually drawing parallels between the mountain and one's body parts. Mary, the teacher, has the students listen to a YouTube programme offering guided meditations for children.¹ The soundscape is made of nature sounds (water, birdsong) and bells, as well as slow keyboard sounds, creating an atmosphere one is more likely to find in one of the Swiss wellness industry's numerous spas and thermal centres than in a school. During the 10-minute sequence, the children remain almost immobile and seem to be immersed in the scene described. The voice evokes a harmonious garden decorated with colourful plants and animals before inviting the audience to climb a majestic mountain. It insists on sensory feelings, images, and smells, both in the depicted imagined scene and within the children's bodies. It also invites the audience to cultivate positive feelings such as love, joy, and gratitude.

I witnessed the scene in Mary's classroom in May 2018 after ten months of field research in the International School.² One element that caught my attention during my fieldwork on the Swiss international school landscape³ – which I had started three years earlier – is the tendency to quickly embrace pedagogical innovations and to proudly feature them while advertising their school on the private school market. Such innovations also tend to spread quickly, and other schools adopt them as well so that they soon become a standard among international schools. The origin of these innovations may vary. They may either be of technological nature or be promoted by international organizations or research-based policies or stem from the latest educational trends. While some of these innovations are adopted by the whole school (e.g., a new centralized teaching organization using iPads), others might just be implemented by some teachers on a voluntary basis (e.g., the latest method in foreign-language learning). Mindfulness meditation represents one of these pedagogical innovations, practiced by some voluntary teachers with their pupils, yet offered in one form or another in nearly all the international schools I visited in Switzerland.

At the International School, mindfulness is one of many activities offered to teachers and pupils. Mindfulness is promoted as a schoolwide pedagogical concept. It is one of the after-school activities offered to children. Training programmes were also offered to teachers at the school, and a partnership was established with external researchers to assess its benefits. The research found that the training programme led to more mindfulness, more self-compassion, more openness to other people, as well as improved quality in relationships. A silence room was created in the school that provides a space for those who want to meditate. Some teachers can also take part in continuing education

programmes abroad. All are offered on a voluntary basis, and some teachers went so far as to practice mindfulness meditation with their pupils on a daily basis. That was Mary’s case.

“Showing self-agency” (which translates in French as “*être autonome*”) is one of the seven key competences mentioned in one of the school curricula whose general goal is to help children become “successful”, “happy”, and “productive”.⁴ According to school concepts, autonomy as a competence is related to the capacity to analyse the demands of one’s environment and consequently apply resources for adequate action. In this chapter, I will discuss how far the practice of mindfulness is referred to as a resource aiming at helping children to achieve agency in their learning and social lives. I will discuss how the specific focus put on sensory, emotional, and cognitive processes during and after mindfulness practice may be instrumental in this. I will argue that this practice can be heuristically conceptualized by referring to the concept of “technology of the self” developed by Foucault and discuss the limits thereof. I will further analyse the pedagogical uses of mindfulness practice: in what context and how is mindfulness practiced at school? What are the teacher’s pedagogical intentions? To what conceptions of autonomy does it relate to?

In order to address these questions, I will rely on data collected in the context of a research project (EDUtrans) on international schools in Switzerland and in transnational arenas (Rey, Bolay, & Schubiger, 2019; Rey, Bolay, & Gez, 2020, 2021). The ethnographic research was conducted between 2015 and 2018 in 21 international schools located in Switzerland, as well as in other international schools in North America (Toronto and Chicago) and East Africa (Nairobi). It involved either short visits or long-term immersion stays, including at the International School; teachers and expert interviews; and observations at job fairs (for prospective teachers) and school fairs (for prospective parents), where international schools marketed themselves to attract teachers and pupils. The practice of mindfulness meditation became an emergent aspect of the ethnographic research process and caught my attention as one of the pedagogical innovations featured by many international schools, partly because it sharply contrasted with Swiss public schools where mindfulness meditation had had little visibility until then or was deemed controversial. This chapter will focus on observations I made in the International School’s primary school section, and in particular in Mary’s classroom, as well as on interviews with teachers and instructors (including for mindfulness meditation) and on the analyses of official documents and school communication material. For a broader contextualization of my observations in Mary’s classroom, I will also rely on data gathered during the broader ethnographic research project conducted in other schools. Firstly, I will describe a routine sequence of mindfulness meditation in Mary’s classroom and how this practice coexists with other “techniques of government” in daily school life. Secondly, I will situate the practice of mindfulness meditation in schools as the result of

the historical, institutional, and scientific translation of a Buddhist contemplative practice into a pedagogical practice. I will then address controversies that have emerged with the spread of mindfulness meditation and suggest that these controversies may be better understood when conceptualizing mindfulness meditation as a technology of the self. Thus, I will address the teacher's pedagogical intentions for practicing mindfulness meditation and to what extent autonomy is an issue here, as well as the importance of contextual factors. To conclude, I will argue that the neoliberal critique of mindfulness meditation is relevant yet limited in grasping the variety of contexts and pedagogical intentions at stake.

Discipline and technology of the self at an international school

Building on the work of Foucault (1988, 2015), discipline and the technologies of the self may be approached as two different “modes of government” that rely on different dynamics. Both technologies of the self and discipline produce specific outcomes, yet their main focus and mode of operation are different. Discipline creates order and one of its main focussing points is the body. Discipline has long been associated with institutions such as prisons, factories, the army, hospitals, and schools, where order is central in the arrangement of space, objects, and bodies. By contrast, technologies of the self create subjects, and their main focus is the work that one accomplishes on oneself. Discipline is externally imposed and associated with (positive or negative) sanctions when one does (not) comply. Technologies of the self need to be adopted and their efficacy at least partly relies on their appropriation by the subject. The ethnographic description that follows will set the ground for discussing how both disciplinary practices and technologies of the self may coexist in a school and how far mindfulness meditation may be understood as a technology of the self, as well as the limits of this conceptualization.

As the day starts in the primary section of the International School, pupils aged 6–13 walk towards the schoolyard with their nanny, mom, or dad. One mother wears a sports outfit, another a blazer indicating she is on her way to work. One father wears a suit with a tie, while another is dressed in casual jeans and a T-shirt. In the schoolyard, children line up in a specific location depending on their age group, which is in turn divided into class groups. When they are allowed to enter the main building, one class after the other, children are asked to walk and remain silent. At times, a teacher asks an undisciplined pupil to return to the main door and walk again to the classroom in a more disciplined manner. Once the children reach their classroom corridor, the line starts to dissolve, and the children resume their noisy chats.

Mary's classroom comprises 24 seven- and eight-year-old second graders with heterogeneous backgrounds in terms of previous school experiences, nationalities, and languages spoken at home. Most of the international school

parents work in multinational corporations based in the region, among which there are large corporations in the food industry, pharmaceutical companies, banks, and corporations active in the trade of raw materials or the extractive industry. International organizations constitute the second sector of occupation, with the World Health Organization, the United Nations, and the United Nations Refugee Agency, among others, attracting expatriates to the region. Another substantial share of the parents work for non-governmental organizations, missions, and diplomatic corps, as well as foundations. This international microcosm is reflected in the staff and student bodies with up to 140 different nationalities to be found in the largest international schools in the region, and more than 80 different mother tongues spoken at home, among which English prevails.

Loud pop music sometimes welcomes the children as they enter the classroom and continue the task they were previously working on. They might get the help of Laura, the assistant teacher, who directs them, corrects their papers, prepares the learning material, and tidies up the classroom. By contrast with Mary, the main teacher, Laura never addresses the whole class but rather remains alert to the issues that might arise at any moment. “It’s not visible, but my radar is always ‘on’”, she said to me. A child’s voice speaks loudly to the whole school out of the loudspeakers: “Today in the library, we are gonna read a story in Croatian”. A parent reads a story in the library every morning in a different language. Mary asks her students, “Do you recognize that voice?” It is the voice of the brother of one of the children. After some working time, the children reach Mary’s “morning ritual”, as she calls it. Mary’s morning ritual mostly starts with a sequence in a circle, when she introduces a topic and discusses an issue while referring to the children’s choices, individual behaviours, experiences, or tastes. That day, Mary talks about the pumpkin, basil, and coriander that the children planted. Meanwhile, a girl is chatting and not listening. Mary interrupts and asks the girl, “How do you feel when someone doesn’t listen to you? I didn’t choose the rules of this class. Who did it?” A child replies, “We did”. Another child objects that she was not present when they made up the rules. Mary answers, “Even if you were not in this class, it would be fair if you listened to others”. Then she addresses the whole class in the circle, “If you have a message, bring it to me, otherwise get ready for dancing”. She asks which dance the children would like to choose. Three popular songs are put forward by the children and the class ends up voting for the ‘Freeze’ dance. A video of the dance from the YouTube platform is then projected onto a large screen, with loud bass. The loud voice says “We are going to sing a song about dancing and freezing. So when I say dance, you are going to dance, and when I say freeze you are going to freeze”. Children dance and freeze, and then dance and sing another song.

Then, Mary transitions to the mindfulness part of the morning routine. “You can find yourself a breathing spot while the song is ending”, she says. As the

children are used to the transition, they immediately lie on the ground, on a carpet, or on a bench. At this moment, an issue develops between two pupils. As she usually does, Mary reacts to interpersonal issues between children by asking them questions and referring to their developing sense of responsibility, “Is it your problem or is it Lizzy’s problem?” When the issue is solved, Mary asks what type of breathing the children wish to do now. One day, a child answered, “We all invented our own breathing,” to which Mary assented, “Yes this is true, we all invented our own breathing”. The children suggest several options, including “Five mountains”, “Happy forest”, “Tooth fairy breathing”. Mary lets the children vote and notes that there is a draw. “A lot of people are not voting though”, she says. Meanwhile, several children started to whisper again. “I want you to realize by yourself when you’re being distracted”. “Train your brain”.

Children lie on the ground while a slow even-pitched recorded female voice conjures up images and sensations related to mountain scenery, while eventually drawing parallels between the mountain and one’s body parts. During the sequence, Mary sometimes intervenes in order to insist on specific aspects: “If you close your eyes, it will be easier for you to imagine and feel”. “If not, chose one spot”. She also corrects the position of some children. “Try to feel that you’re the mountain and feel as strong as the mountain”. “Try to notice when your brain is thinking to something else”. “Good job for focusing on yourself”. “Check in with yourself. Notice how you feel”. Meanwhile, Laura and a special education teacher prepare some material for future learning activities that the children will do alone or in small groups across several workshops. The sequence ends when the recorded voice saying, “Thank yourself for the good work”.

From a Buddhist practice to the classroom: A historical translation mediated by science

In order to understand how Mary came to practice mindfulness meditation in her classroom, it is helpful to address the conditions surrounding the growing interest in mindfulness meditation in science, care, business, and education in the West. Supported by a growing field of clinical studies, mindfulness practice – which was until then mostly associated with the counterculture (Kucinkas, 2018) – was introduced into care institutions in the context of stress reduction and mental health programmes in the 1970s. According to Kabat-Zinn (2003, p. 145), mindfulness is related to “particular qualities of attention and awareness that can be cultivated and developed through meditation”, which can be defined as “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally, to the unfolding of experience moment by moment”. In order to understand the growing, yet uneven, popularity of mindfulness in schools, I will provide an outline of the complex translation process that prepared the ground for the spreading of mindfulness practices in the care sector and, more recently, in

education. This process relies on the translation of a contemplative practice, which in Western epistemology is categorized as “religious”⁵, into a scientific discourse through the development of neurosciences. This translation from a repertoire of religious practice into a scientific object of investigation is central in the process of how mindfulness became a secular practice and thereby was able to move into secular institutions such as health care and schools.

Key actors of this translation include Prof. Jon Kabat-Zinn, an American scientist and Buddhist practitioner, who launched and tested the “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Programme”. This eight-week programme launched in the 1970s gained some recognition in medical and scientific circles as it was proved to be efficient in preventing specific mental troubles. While commenting on mindfulness-based interventions, Kabat-Zinn (2003) acknowledges the Buddhist origin of mindfulness meditation, yet he argues that mindfulness is not inherently Buddhist, but rather is about attention, which is a universal process. He refers to the approach of the historical Buddha as an inquiry into the nature of the mind, rather than as a founder of a religious tradition. Over the last decades, contemplative practice became objectified as a legitimate scientific object of inquiry in the growing field of neurosciences (Tang, Hölzel & Posner, 2015). The objectification of meditation through neuroscientific imagery helped shift its status from religious to secular. Mindfulness became perceived as an evidence-based practice, which was confirmed both through semi-experimental designs that validated its efficacy in preventing mental troubles and a growing field of neurosciences that created an epistemic status for meditation as a “real” phenomenon. This new status came along with a decontextualization of contemplative practice from its social, philosophical-religious contexts and epistemologies and a recontextualization into new social, philosophical, and religious contexts and epistemologies. Mindfulness became increasingly popular in the business sector, in the wellness industry, in therapy, and more recently in education. There, research also played a role in framing mindfulness as an educational practice. While there was hardly any scientific publication on mindfulness in education around 2000, the field has significantly increased since then (Schonert-Reichl & Roeser, 2016), and over the last years, research programmes on mindfulness in schools have been launched in several prestigious universities. Expected benefits of mindfulness include the enhancement of children’s capacity to self-regulate their attention and their emotions (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Maynard et al., 2017).

Yet, the Buddhist origin of mindfulness meditation complicates its adoption as a secular practice in educational contexts, and mindfulness is also referred to as a practice at the intersection of religion, science, and healing (Ergas, 2014). This tension is increased by the blurred boundaries between research and practice, as many key actors of research on mindfulness also happen to be engaged in contemplative practice. This tends to make its reception in educational contexts where religious issues tend to be sensitive and more difficult, while popular

references to mindfulness meditation navigate between various neuro-scientific, spiritual, and medical discursive regimes, as we shall see from the Swiss context of our research. In several Swiss cantons, authorities restricted the practice of mindfulness in public schools. As I conducted this ethnographic research, one Swiss canton banned the “Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction Programme” as a non-recognized project for public schools due to the lack of scientific evidence and questioned its alleged non-denominational nature. Another Swiss canton also decided to reject a mindfulness programme that was initially slated to be offered in schools on a larger scale. This reluctance may partly be attributed to the ambivalent connotation of a meditation practice framed as secular, yet with explicit Buddhist roots.⁶ On the other hand, some teachers in Swiss public schools practice mindfulness with their students. Associations and training sessions for schools and teachers developed, including recently among institutions of teacher education. Books with teacher experiences or guidelines get published in Switzerland and some students in education conduct their thesis on the subject. While caution is observed on the part of educational authorities, mindfulness practice is also gaining popularity among some teachers in Swiss public schools.

From depoliticization to self-entrepreneurs: Mindfulness as a technology of the self

Teachers adopting mindfulness meditation primarily acknowledge its potential benefits. Yet, this practice also raised its share of controversies. The development of mindfulness meditation in a wide array of domains, from therapy to schools and the business world, also led to growing defiance. Critical scholarship highlighted that while mindfulness may enhance resilience, it also tends to enhance political resignation and passivity. In the business world and in education, meditating may help professionals and students alike to cope with the pressure of an ever-growing competition and the expectations of ever-higher productivity. The development of mindfulness in the business sector, notably among the Big Tech companies like Google, is largely based on the belief that improving employees’ well-being would eventually enhance the company’s productivity. In these circles, mindfulness has been promoted by professional, educational, or economic elites that were unaware of their own privileged position with regard to the effects of mindfulness (Kucinskas, 2018). Regarding causal attributions, failure tends to be perceived as an individual rather than a systemic problem, and thus mindfulness meditation fails to address the cause of collective suffering and systemic changes that need to be addressed (Purser, 2019). Eventually, with some exceptions in the context of social activism, mindfulness meditation deals with how to comply with the context rather than transforming it. Thus, the practice would then lead to a depoliticization of the stance of individuals – although that might be contrary to some of its pioneers’ expectations.

As has been shown by Foucault, the “medical gaze” (like other scientific discourses) produces subjects that are inherently situated in relation to the norms produced by medical discourse (Foucault, 1997). Barker (2014) thus argues that mindfulness meditation contributes to an extended medicalization of life. According to her, its practice expands the definition of disease to include emotional ups and downs, as well as the need for therapeutic intervention. Paradoxically, while mindfulness meditation supposedly opposes the rationalization of life, it turns out to be a strong disciplinary practice, as it extends the magnitude of “therapeutic surveillance” (p. 172) to every breath and moment. Building on Barker’s argument, Reveley (2016) analyses how this technique may be instrumental in constructing an educational subject that is in line with neoliberal ideology. This process consists in placing a greater part of moral responsibility on the children with regard to their well-being, self-protection, and self-surveillance. Reveley thus argues that mindfulness meditation either may be a beneficial meditative technique or may be turned into a neoliberal self-technology institutionalized as a form of “therapeutic education”.

Yet in a certain manner, this discussion is too narrow to capture the contextual variations of the practise of mindfulness meditation in schools. First, the use of mindfulness in a classroom is not limited to therapeutic purposes. It is thus important to take the intentions of the teachers practicing mindfulness at school into consideration, as it is likely that these intentions are of a pedagogical rather than therapeutic nature – an idea I shall develop in the next section. Second, the supposedly innovative character of mindfulness meditation must be put into perspective as one among many techniques of government in schools. These techniques have developed along a continuum framing norms as either external or internal to the subjects. On one end, disciplinary practices aim at creating order by situating norms as external to the subject, targeting primarily bodies and behaviours. Examples include the “classical” forms of punishment or the more recent trend of “positive discipline”. On the other end of the continuum, technologies of the self situate the locus of agency as internal to the subject and derive effectiveness by framing the way subjects get to relate to themselves (and their environment), possibly aiming to develop self-awareness, self-reflection, self-regulation or any form of self-development. Examples include moral education (see as an illustration of Foucault’s discussion of Loyola’s exercises) or the practice of mindfulness meditation. Mindfulness meditation is not exceptional in that sense and shows continuities with other techniques of government that have long been developed in schools.

From the ethnographic vignette presented earlier, we can analyse how both disciplinary practices and technologies of the self are set in the daily routine of the children at International School. Discipline manifests itself in the lining up of the students in the schoolyard, and the walking in silence in the hall creates a specific order that both pragmatically allows for managing the flux of the pupils’ circulation in the common school space and asserts that there are rules to be

followed. This practice targets the pupils' bodies via specific practices (standing in line, silence) and sanction follows transgression of the rule (by starting the whole process again). Discipline is a collective concern for teachers in the school (for instance, with regard to the behaviour of their charges in the shared space outside the classrooms), and it is also an issue for many teachers with their pupils, notably with regard to classroom management. One example is the popularity of continuing education on positive discipline in international schools, which aims at developing disciplinary practices that favour positive sanctions and encouragements over negative sanctions and punishment (Bolay & Rey, 2019). By contrast, Mary makes little use of disciplinary practices involving rules and (positive or negative) sanctions. Her interventions mostly rely on maieutics, asking children to reflect on their attitudes and behaviour, and appealing to a collectively defined agreement rather than an externally imposed rule. Of particular interest is Mary's stance towards the children during and after the practice of mindfulness. She constantly refers to their own judgements or how they should raise their awareness about their feelings, their conduct, and their reflections on the best thing for them to do in specific situations. By repeatedly calling upon their sense of responsibility, she invites and enables them to perceive themselves as autonomous in their choice and behaviour, as self-governing learning subjects. She also grounds her expectations in their awareness of their own cognitive behaviour ("Train your brain"), state of mind and cognitive processes ("I want you to notice by yourself when you're being distracted."), and sensory feelings ("Check in with yourself. Notice how you feel").

Pedagogical intentions and the concept of autonomy in an uncertain world

Foucault argued that techniques of government also rely on self-government, which implies the work that a subject operates on themselves. What the practice of mindfulness also reveals in the case we studied is how this *dispositif* aims at raising the children's awareness of their sensations, emotions, and thoughts in order to become autonomous and self-confident learners. Mary reported to me that she developed mindfulness in her class as a response to the pedagogical difficulties she experienced due to the complex and heterogeneous profiles of the children. Among 24 pupils, 13 had special needs of some kind, mostly related to a specific language, or cognitive or psychological needs. She told me that since she implemented her morning routine including mindfulness meditation, the atmosphere of the class had changed: she experiences more serenity among the children and insists that they have never complained about going to school again. She attends a yearly training programme in the USA on learning and neurosciences which inspired her implementation of mindfulness meditation, and she said that it radically changed the way she teaches, as mindfulness meditation has now become fundamental to her work. While she thinks

that her class may sometimes look chaotic to external visitors – partly because she uses few disciplinary techniques, she perceives it as a normal dimension of learning processes and activities in her classroom.

Taking a step back and turning to sociological theories, mindfulness practice may also offer a space of “functional deceleration” in a context of general social acceleration, following Rosa’s thesis (2013), which is also characteristic of the international school environment. While the international corporate, financial, or diplomatic microcosm to which the pupils’ families belong are engaged in professional contexts where technological acceleration prevails, children also experience the accelerating pace of their educational lives (Bolay & Rey, 2019). International schools train students to become autonomous and cope with the expectations of flexibility and mobility that characterize the multinational corporation model. In this context, the temporal dimensions of teaching practices and technologies in international schools are in line with the temporality associated with the social position of pupils: they are fast and shift rapidly. With the help of the teaching assistant, the children engage in activities that follow each other at a rather quick pace, transitions are smooth, both aiming at avoiding boredom while maximizing the children’s enjoyment of the activities and rationalizing their capacity to concentrate through targeted physical or intellectual practices. Every moment of the children’s day is filled and planned, from school to breaks to after-school activities organized by the school, and there is rarely a moment of “lost time” in the busy schedule of the ten-hour day most children spend at any international school. Meditation, like other body-mind practices, may well offer this moment of functional deceleration in a context of general acceleration of the pace of life in this international microcosm.

Mary, like many teachers in her school, mentions the challenges of children’s lives in this specific milieu: rather privileged on the economic level yet going through multiple transitions and mobilities due to their parents’ career paths, spending long hours at school, even more time with their nanny, or confronted by parental anxieties. She refers to mindfulness with at least three different pedagogical intentions. First, it offers an answer to her classroom management issues, providing clues on how to cope with a highly heterogeneous classroom and with the diverse learning and educational needs of the students. Second, it sustains the capacity of the children for socio-affective regulation and well-being, and fosters their autonomy as social actors and members of the classroom community. In the third place, it aims at developing cognitive self-regulation among learners by becoming aware of their cognitive processes (by observing their own thoughts and attention capacities), as well as reflecting on their own cognitive strategies. Overall, Mary intends to help the children regulate their emotions, be aware of the necessary conditions for learning, and reflect on their behaviour as learners, in other words, to foster autonomy in a complex and uncertain world.

Conclusion

McNay (2009, p. 63) pointed out that under neoliberalism, “individual autonomy is not an obstacle or limit to social control but one of its central technologies”. Discourses on mindfulness promote indeed the concept of a responsible, autonomous individual dedicated to self-improvement (Arthington, 2016). Yet injunctions to autonomy in educational contexts are inherently paradoxical and rely on the “wilful” internalization of educational expectations by pupils (Durler, 2015). The analysis of the techniques and *dispositifs* which mediate this process is therefore of central importance in order to understand how autonomy is enacted daily in school practices. We have discussed how, in the mind of the promoters of mindfulness meditation in educational settings, this practice is expected to develop specific qualities and sustain learning processes, like socio-emotional competences and socio-emotional learning. By observing this mindfulness meditation contextualized in Mary’s classroom, we could also point to pedagogical intentions related to the development of metacognition and reflexivity: mindfulness is about developing awareness in order for the children to become reflective in their own behaviour as social actors and learners. Thus, it positions the children as endowed with agency in their learning process. This reflective way to frame autonomy echoes the specific microcosm to which the school belongs, namely an “educational cosmopolitan enclave” where the children of diplomats and CEOs mingle with local elites before moving on to other cosmopolitan enclaves across the globe (Bolay & Rey, 2021; Rey, Bolay, & Gez, 2021). There, flexibility and adaptability are central attitudes for coping with mobility and changing economic or work environments, and these attitudes are also cultivated in international schools. In response to this context, school actors also express the need to create a sense of belonging among the so-called “third culture kids”. Body-mind techniques like mindfulness meditation are also instrumental in this, as they ritualize the daily routine and represent a space of shared experience and practice, a moment of functional deceleration beyond performance and competition.

By conceptualizing mindfulness meditation as a technology of the self, we highlighted the processes by which this practice implies the government of the individual subjects – namely, by framing the relation that subjects develop to their thoughts, sensations, emotions, and more largely to themselves and their environment. Yet the exclusive framing of mindfulness meditation as a neoliberal technology may also be limitative as it underplays the importance of the context, the differentiated and socially stratified dimensions of how such *dispositifs* unfold in a given context, and the pedagogical intentions of the teachers.

Notes

- 1 For copyright reasons, the author could not include quotations from this program in the introductory paragraph but instead created a simulation of a YouTube mindfulness programme for children inspired by a Chat GPT text on the same topic.

- 2 For anonymity reasons, the name of the school, teachers, and children are fictive, and minor contextual information are changed.
- 3 This chapter is based on data collected in the context of the research project EDU-trans on the “Transnationalisation of Swiss Private Education”, which was funded by the Swiss National Science Foundation (project number 161231).
- 4 The other competences are to become lifelong learners; knowing how to interact with others, with the world, and with diverse tools and resources; transdisciplinarity; and multiliterate thinking.
- 5 For a critique or problematization on the category of religion, its Western epistemology, and normative assumptions, see Asad (1993) or Gez, Droz, Rey, and Soares (2021).
- 6 It should be noted that while mindfulness meditation can be practiced without any reference to Buddhist symbols and rituals, as the description of Mary’s classroom practice shows, some teachers choose instead to include symbols from Buddhist or other oriental spiritualities, which does raise questions about the alleged strictly secular status of mindfulness mediation.

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