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Mindfulness in the classroom: Cultivating peace from within

Maya VanDriel
University of Northern Iowa

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MINDFULNESS IN THE CLASSROOM:
CULTIVATING PEACE FROM WITHIN

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
University Honors

Maya VanDriel
University of Northern Iowa
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Introduction

Teachers are placed with the difficult task of transferring knowledge to the next generation of leaders. This knowledge transfer can be measured in various ways. What cannot be easily quantified is the impact of the life skills taught to accomplish this handoff of reading, writing and math skills. Often times, teachers are the role model of how a student can cope with life inside and outside of the classroom. Teaching mindfulness in the classroom is a powerful method that shows students how to self-regulate emotions in order to cope with whatever life brings them. These life skills are essential for guiding the next generation of leaders.

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways that mindfulness practices can support the needs of students and specifically how educators have integrated mindfulness practices into their teaching. The goal was to provide a comprehensive piece on mindfulness for educators who are interested in the practice and provide resources for them to begin their journey.

Literature Review

What is mindfulness?

Mindfulness means different things to different people. It is an abstract subject that can only truly be understood after practicing it for yourself. According to Srinivasan (2014), Mindfulness is energy we cultivate through kind, present-moment awareness. It involves the practice of coming back to the peaceful, compassionate space we all have inside ourselves with curiosity and without judgment” (p.27). Hassed and Chambers defined mindfulness as “a mental discipline aimed at training attention” (2014, p. 6). The practice of mindfulness has been around for centuries. According to the Buddha, mindfulness is the source of happiness and joy. He reminded us that:

We each have a seed of mindfulness, but we usually forget to water it. If we know how to take refuge in our breath, in our steps, then we can touch our seeds of peace and joy and allow them to manifest for our enjoyment (Hanh, 2011, p. 16).

Marcum (2005) noted that mindfulness has roots in China, where the character for the word mindfulness is a combination of the characters for “now,” “mind” and “heart.”

Srinivasan (2014) taught students in her class mindfulness practices throughout the school day and then interviewed them to see what they gained from their mindfulness practice. From eleven-year-old Uma’s perspective:

Mindfulness is being present and thoughtful. It’s to be living in the moment. Being mindful is to catch yourself when you feel your mind wandering or thinking about things other than what you’re supposed to be focusing on. You can come back to breath to do this. To me, mindfulness means to concentrate in class. Now, whenever I’m in class, I make sure to be present. (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 38)

Depending on whom you talk to, mindfulness can be described in different ways. However, all definitions seem to have a similar theme of being aware and training yourself to pay attention in order to achieve a more calm mind.

How is it beneficial in the classroom?

Teachers constantly tell their students to “pay attention” but never take the time to teach them what truly paying attention is. Mindfulness teaches children how to focus their attention back after losing focus and to maintain this attention (Hanh, 2011). After integrating mindfulness curriculum into the classroom for five weeks, Black and Fernando (2013) found that student

behavior improved significantly in many areas, one including paying attention. It can also improve mental health. Simply by training our attention to be in the present moment causes the default mode of the brain, the parts associated with worrying, dwelling and judging, to become less active and therefore diminishing back those pathways (Hassed & Chambers, 2014). As our brains continually come back to this state of peacefulness and attention, these pathways become stronger and grow. Just like a muscle, “the more [the mind] lies in certain states, the more it will seek them. Mindfulness is a way of training our minds through intentional awareness so they can stay in a more peaceful and compassionate state” (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 27).

Mindfulness also fosters social-emotional learning growth. Classrooms that integrated mindfulness found improvements in emotional regulation and social skills (Srinivasan, 2014). According to Black and Fernando (2013), it improves student’s self-control and respect for others. Mindfulness allows students to “foster self-control through nonattachment to transitory experiences, such as thoughts, feelings and sensations” (Hassed & Chambers, 2014, p. 6). Teaching social-emotional skills are imperative to creating socially competent citizens, a goal that is often overlooked in schools when the focus is only on academics.

Mindfulness benefits diverse learners such as students with special needs or those who have lower executive functioning skills. Mindfulness can help these students get rid of distractions such as negativity, fear, anger, and anxiety (Hassed & Chambers, 2014). A study by Klatt (2013) observed a mindfulness program that was integrated in two third-grade classrooms in a low-income urban school in the Midwest for eight weeks. At the end of the study, teachers observed significantly less hyperactive behavior, ADHD symptoms, and inattentiveness in their students. These improvements also continued to increase even after the program ended. In another study of 12-16 year-olds in a British school that integrated mindfulness practice, students

reported significantly decreased depression symptoms immediately after the end of the program compared to their non-mindfulness practicing peers at separate schools (Kuyken, 2013). The author concluded that mindfulness in general shows promise as a tool to bolster adolescent mental health. Students from a low socio-economic background also often have less developed executive function skills than their peers. Executive functioning can be described as a number of cognitive processes that over time support children's ability to regulate their own behavior which will allow them to develop greater emotional, social, and cognitive competence (Griffen, 2015). These cognitive processes include "working memory (the ability to pay attention and remember facts while using them to complete tasks), inhibitory control (the ability to follow rules, modulate emotions, and delay gratification), and cognitive flexibility (the ability to plan, make judgments, and self-correct)" (Griffen, 2015, p. 4). These skills are often learned from observing the people around us, such as our parents, and how they react to situations and problem solve. Some children are not able to learn these skills from their family due to family members not being proficient in these skills themselves. It is imperative that students learn these skills in order to be ready to learn when they enter school and for them to have continued academic success. Since these students are not learning the skills at home, it is put on the teacher to teach them. This can be done through mindfulness practice.

Research shows that practicing mindfulness activates many of the same brain areas as those that are active when we are engaged in executive functioning. Unsurprisingly, then, mindfulness practice has been found to increase many facets of executive functioning, particularly attention, short-term memory, regulating emotional impulses, planning, and mental flexibility. (Hassed & Chambers, 2014, p. 24)

With the number of students with special needs increasing in our classrooms, it is imperative that teachers do everything to meet these students' needs. It is also just as important to support students who have lower executive functioning skills and give them the tools they need to succeed in the classroom as well as life beyond school. As studies carried out by Hassed and Chambers and Griffen demonstrated, one way to help these students is to integrate mindfulness into the classroom.

Yet another benefit of mindfulness practice is that it builds resilience in students. With mindfulness, students can find peace within themselves and preserve their inner joy. This allows them to better cope and adapt to the difficulties and challenges in their lives (Hanh, 2011). Teaching for resilience helps all students, but particularly those experiencing poverty or those with challenging home lives. Mindfulness can also support these students by creating a comfortable and caring classroom climate. As noted by Srinivasan (2014), mindfulness practice in the classroom promotes a peaceful, loving classroom. This peaceful and loving classroom would give students facing challenges outside of school a safe environment to open up and thrive.

Teachers also gain benefits from practicing it in their own lives. The teacher reaps many benefits such as increases in their sense of well-being, increases in teaching self-efficacy, being better able to manage classroom behavior and maintain supportive relationships with their students (Srinivasan, 2014). A study done by the University of Virginia found that when teachers practiced mindfulness they reported that "their anxiety, depression, feelings of burnout, being rushed and perceived stress all went down compared with a control group. Their sleep improved, and the teachers said they felt less judgmental" (Kamenetz, 2016, p. 14). A teacher's emotional state is transferred onto their students so it is critical that teachers are mentally healthy

and are positive themselves throughout the day so their students, in turn, are more likely to be as well.

How to integrate mindfulness into the classroom:

There are a variety of easy methods to integrate mindfulness into the classroom which are drawn from *Peace is Every Step, Wherever You Go There You Are*, and *Teach, Breathe, Learn*. These techniques include:

- **Breathing:** The foundation of practicing mindfulness is focusing on the breath. Paying attention to your breath, and your breathing alone, allows you to pay attention to just one thing at a time. After focusing on your breathing, you can slowly bring your wandering mind back to the present moment (Srinivasan, 2014). This can be done anywhere at any time which allows students to easily do it on their own whenever they need it. Teachers can monitor students' breathing throughout the day to better understand how students are feeling. When students are having fast, shallow breaths the teacher can suggest that the class or a student mindfully breathe for a minute. This allows students to relax so they can better perform the task by regaining focus after having a peaceful moment.
- **Reciting Gathas:** The teacher can invite students to recite a gatha, a short insightful verse from the Zen tradition, while mindfully breathing. This allows the class to calm themselves and have a more peaceful outlook on things (Srinivasan, 2014). An example of a gatha includes "breathing in, I calm my body. Breathing out, I smile. Dwelling in the present moment, I know this is a wonderful moment" (Hanh, 1991, p. 10). This short verse, and others like it, can easily be done during the morning meeting or throughout the day to be used as quick brain breaks. If the class is getting frustrated during a subject, the

teacher may invite them to recite a gatha to increase motivation and to give them a moment of peace.

- **Visualizing:** Visualizing is a great tool to use when practicing mindfulness. Srinivasan has her class visualize “seeing our thoughts as clouds in the sky” (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 34) to help students come out of distracting thoughts. When distracting thoughts occur, visualize that thought being in a cloud and watch it move across the sky. Doing this, allows the person to be conscious of the thought but not get caught up in them. Just take note of the thought and let it float away and continue the task at hand. Teaching visualizing techniques, such as this one, allows students to practice self-regulation and focus their attention back on the task at hand.
- **Walking:** Walking can also be a time to practice mindfulness by placing focus on steps and breathing. An easy way to integrate this is to invite students to walk mindfully during transitions. Srinivasan said she “walks mindfully by coordinating each step with my breath and silently saying a gatha or positive word to myself with each step” (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 39-40). Walking mindfully can be done at any time of the day and does not take away from instructional time which makes it so valuable. Many of these techniques, including walking mindfully, can be done without needing many resources and only require setting aside a few minutes a day. This method of mindfulness, incorporated at the beginning of the day, sets up the class for success the rest of the day.
- **Deep relaxation:** Another effective way to practice mindfulness is through deep relaxation, which can also be called meditation. In *Teach, Breathe, Learn* Srinivasan (2014) integrated this method into her classroom. One of the students in her class reflected:

Before practicing deep relaxation I felt really heavy and I was very worried about several things that were happening at that very moment. During the practice I felt I was glued to the floor. I felt like I was in heaven. When doing the deep relaxation I felt like just doing deep relaxation for the rest of my life. When finished, I felt really calm and loose and really, really fresh. I felt much much better, I felt pleased and really thankful. (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 44)

She explains that through deep relaxation students learn to “self-soothe, regulate their behavior, and experience that they can find relief from stressful situations by simply focusing attention on their breath and body” (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 44). Although deep relaxation can take away from instructional time, it is extremely beneficial to students and is something they can use outside of the classroom as well.

- **Noticing Mudra’s:** A mudra is a hand position that expresses an energy, attitude or action. Having your hands palms up shows receptivity and openness. Now, think of the energy of a fist. People often make their hands into a fist when they are angry this “waters the seeds of anger and violence within you every time you do it, and they respond by sprouting and growing stronger” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 144). Hahn suggests that whenever you find yourself in this position to place your palms together in the prayer position in front of your heart or simply place your palms up. Then, try to notice what happens to your anger or hurt feelings if you hold these positions for a while. Often times, placing your hands in these positions allows you to calm down and become more open and receptive.
- **Mindful Moment Room:** A school in Baltimore has adopted a Mindful Moment Room where disruptive students can go to calm down instead of being sent to detention. While

they are there, students go through “breathing practices and discussion with a counselor and are instructed on how to manage their emotions” (Khorsandi, 2016). This strategy actually teaches students how to deal with their emotions instead of simply just reprimanding them for their actions through detention.

- **Everyday activities:** Mindfulness can be integrated into almost everything we do.

Another student in Srinivasan’s class, Katja, age ten, describes how she integrates mindfulness into her everyday routine:

I put on my shoes with awareness every time. I felt good that I finally thought about how lucky I am to even have shoes. I never thought about that before! Now whenever I put on my shoes I feel how lucky I am. (Srinivasan, 2014, p. 51)

One can also recite gathas while doing everyday activities such as washing hands and reciting “water flows over these hands, may I use them skillfully to preserve our precious planet” and when looking in a mirror saying “awareness is a mirror reflecting the four elements. Beauty is a heart that generates love and a mind that is open” (Hanh, 2011, p. 53).

Although integrating mindfulness into every task may seem overwhelming at first to students, the more they practice it, the more natural it will feel. As they start to notice how calm they are while practicing, it will motivate them to continue to use it more often until it becomes second nature to them.

Methods

Overview and Research Questions

The purpose of this research study was to explore the ways that mindfulness practices can support the needs of students in PreK-16 classrooms, and specifically how educators have integrated mindfulness practices into their teaching. It aimed to discover what mindfulness is, the benefits it fosters when utilized in the classroom, simple techniques to use in the classroom, and resources to get teachers started on integrating mindfulness. The answers to the questions studied can inform educators on mindfulness practices and give them the resources they need to integrate these techniques into their own classrooms. The main research questions for the study were:

1. How might educators approach mindfulness in their teaching?
2. What might be the benefits of integrating mindfulness practice into classrooms?
3. What resources might be most helpful for current and future educators who are interested in promoting mindfulness practices in their classroom and/or school?

The research methods are described in detail in the following sections: Setting and Participants, Research Design, Data Collection, and Data Analysis.

Settings and Participants

For the purpose of this study, three females who were experienced in teaching mindfulness were interviewed. The researcher reached out to four potential participants but only three felt that they fit the guidelines, outlined in Appendix A, and consented to the study. The participants were found through the Mindful Schools website as well as through personal connections to local educators who taught mindfulness. The participants' names were kept confidential, due to the personal nature of the interviews, and will be referred to here using

pseudonyms. The first participant, Sierra taught High School Social Studies for 17 years and integrated mindfulness practices into her classroom. She then became a mindfulness consultant where she is contracted with schools to teach mindfulness to Middle School and High School students as well as leading Professional Development meetings for staff on mindfulness practices. The second participant, Carrie, is a psychology professor at a small liberal arts college. She teaches her students mindfulness practices in her Psychology and Advanced Writing classes along with teaching a class solely centered on mindfulness practices. The last participant, Jane, taught mindfulness to her Alternative High School GED Preparation class. All of the participants participated in training to educate themselves on mindfulness practices and some to become certified to teach mindfulness. The interviews took place over Skype, a phone call, or in person at a setting of the participants choosing.

Research Design

The research design of this study took the shape of a semi-structured interview (Myers & Newman, 2007). The interview protocol, found in Appendix A, directed the interviews. This protocol assisted in assuring these research questions were answered in data collection. However, the researcher desired the freedom to be flexible if they felt any responses required elaboration or clarification. The questions were used as a starting point that guided the conversation and lead to additional questions for clarification and elaboration. Participants were free to not answer questions or leave the interview if they so wished at any time. The purpose of the research was to discover what exactly mindfulness is along with learning what practices can be used in the classroom and what benefits these practices may have on students. This information would then be used to inform educators about mindfulness and effective mindfulness practices they can

integrate into their own classrooms. The qualitative nature of these interviews allowed a deep, and clear understanding of the participant's experiences (Myers & Newman, 2007).

Data Collection

This study acquired IRB Human Subjects approval for the use of interviews as a data collection strategy. The researcher met with each participant, either digitally or in person, for anywhere from 45 minutes to an hour to conduct the interview, which followed the interview protocol listed in Appendix A. The participants provided written or verbal consent before the interview took place. The interviews were audio recorded and then later transcribed. Once the data was analyzed, all recordings were deleted and pseudonyms were implemented in order to protect the participants' privacy.

Data Analysis

The data analysis process began once the interviews and transcriptions were finished. Each transcript was carefully read and important points were marked. The constant comparative method was used to identify emerging thematic categories (Glesne, 2006). Through this process, emerging themes such as honoring humanity and emotions, social-emotional learning, barriers, and benefits were identified. Once this process was completed for all three transcripts, notes from each were compared for similarities and differences in terms of defining mindfulness, strategies used, perceptions of benefits of practices, as well as resources available for future professional development. Identifying these similarities and differences allowed the researcher to compile the central themes and benefits which will be discussed in the Findings from the study, as listed below.

Findings

Defining Mindfulness

Each participant shared their own unique definition of mindfulness while all including the term “present moment.” This term is also found in the literature reviewed. They talked about “being aware” or “paying attention” to the present moment. There was also a common theme of being aware of that moment with openness and without judgment. Becoming less judgmental, Jane believes, is one of the purposes of practicing mindfulness. Both Sierra and Carrie included these two themes in their comprehensive definition of mindfulness. Sierra defined mindfulness as “paying attention to the present moment with curiosity and without judgment” (Interview, 9-15-16). Carrie, who comes from a psychology background, mentioned a new idea of calling mindfulness “a state of mind”. She described mindfulness as “a state of mind that is intentionally bringing awareness to the present moment experience with openness to the experience and curiosity and a willingness to be with whatever is” (Interview, 9-15-16).

Personal Journey on the Mindfulness Path

Sierra noticed that, “It seems to me that more people do come to mindfulness in a time of crisis” (Interview, 9-15-16). This was true for two of our participants, namely Jane and Sierra, who were struggling with depression and found mindfulness as a helpful tool to cope with their depression. They both mentioned that they wanted another strategy to cope besides Western medicine. One of them stated that, “I wanted to get better, and I didn’t want to just take a pill. I wanted a way to deal with everything in my life” (Interview, 9-15-16). The other participant had professional interests in the study of mindfulness and conducting research on using mindfulness

as a stress management technique. Although, she also stated she uses it in her own personal life as well.

All participants began their mindfulness journey with a formal training however, they all had different reasons for participating in this training. Sierra and Jane completed trainings through the Mindful Schools Program while Carrie completed a program through Duke University. Carrie went through the training in order to become a Certified Mindfulness Facilitator so she could carry out her research. Jane took background courses to educate herself on mindfulness but she also courses on specific subjects and skills she believed were things she needed to work on. Sierra completed trainings for her own personal practice as well as becoming certified to teach mindfulness to use with her high school students. She believes that teachers practicing mindfulness on their own before teaching their students the practice is incredibly important. She stated that, “It’s going to be much more authentic when you teach it if you were practicing” (Interview, 9-15-16). She said that because she practiced on her own, she was able to give example strategies to her students on how and when she had used that strategy in her own personal life. She said talking about her personal mindfulness practice helped students buy into mindfulness knowing that an adult in their life is benefiting from these practices and can see the results for themselves.

They all agreed that the reason they brought mindfulness into their classroom was because they cared about their students and colleagues and wanted to help them. Sierra reflected that she,

saw how stressed out my students were, how stressed out my colleagues were, and it’s like we just keep thinking that if we do more maybe we will figure it all out. But no, there is a very different way to handle it (Interview, 9-15-16).

Carrie had a similar experience with students in her college Advanced Writing Class. In this class, students had to write an extensive research paper throughout the semester. She found that students did not have a hard time with the content but had “difficulties managing their time and managing their emotions while they were trying to work through this big project” (Interview, 9-15-16). So she implemented mindfulness in this class to teach students strategies to deal with these non-academic barriers. Jane, who taught Alternative High School, wanted to give the students a moment to themselves after a hectic day. The students had to overcome so much just to get to her class and often had many hard life experiences they were overcoming. She wanted to give them tools to help deal with their stressful situations.

Sierra taught mindfulness to her students for all these reasons, but also as a reminder to herself to be practicing. She said that it helped her recognize when she was making judgments of her students. Instead of thinking that a student was just lazy and did not like her class, she instead thought of the reasons behind why a student was acting a certain way. It could be that the student was tired or that they just broke up with their girlfriend. She said that this practice has not only benefited her but her students as well. She stated, “In terms of just my awareness of my students and my judgment and my reactions in the classroom also helped with relationship building because I was just more receptive and attuned to them” (Interview, 9-15-16).

Honoring Humanity

Sierra reflected, “I think when we’re teaching mindfulness it’s kind of this acknowledgment that you are a human being and I am a human being and we’re all dealing with the human condition” (Interview, 9-15-16). Mindfulness in the classroom acknowledges the fact that students are complex people with emotions and not just sponges that can soak up all the

information a teacher is teaching every day no matter the circumstances. She expressed that it showed her students she cared about them as people, which helped with relationship building. This theme of honoring their student's humanity was present in all three participants.

An aspect of mindfulness that was discussed is that it honors student's emotions and judgments. If students are dealing with complex emotions, it will be difficult to focus on the lesson being taught. Sierra revealed to her students that mindfulness helped her during a very hard time in her life and told her story honestly. She then expressed that she wanted to teach them mindfulness so it could help them if they ever go through a tough time like she did. She stated

I want to share this with you because before you can even learn anything or read or focus, you need to be taking care of you and if you're too stressed out and flipping out in this sort of fight or flight response, you're not going to learn anything I'm teaching you about the French Revolution (Interview, 9-15-16).

Jane discussed the idea that it is human nature to judge other people and ourselves and that everyone does it whether they like it or not. She mentioned that we say terrible things in our head and get mad at ourselves for even thinking it. Jane thinks that it is ok because "your thoughts are not you" (Interview, 9-29-16). She followed up by saying that mindfulness can help us realize when we are judging and to recognize that you are doing it and then let those thoughts go and move on. Jane suggested, being aware of when we are judging allows us to understand the reason behind our actions and thoughts more clearly.

Along with honoring emotion, mindfulness teaches students how their brain and body works in regards to why they are feeling certain emotions and what they can do to cope with it. In the Mindful Schools Curriculum that Sierra and Jane were trained in, they considered

mindfulness as “getting the user’s manual for your brain and body” (Interview, 9-15-16). They reflected that mindfulness teaches students what is going on in their body when they experience different emotions and what strategies they can use for each emotion. Sierra taught this to her students by discussing why people say things they will later regret when they are mad and why your heart starts beating fast when you are nervous. These are things that teachers expect their students to know even when some adults don’t even know the reasoning behind it. She then taught her students ways to cope with those emotions. She perceived it to be empowering for students to have this “user’s manual” and that students appreciated it. Jane argued that training yourself to be aware of your emotions can help your social interactions. She explained that even something simple such as knowing you are grumpy in the morning “if you’re aware of that you’re not as likely to snap at people. So that makes you more conscious of your mood. You can’t be a super human being” (Interview, 9-29-16). She honored student’s emotions by stating that is it alright to be grumpy, they just have to be aware that they are and how it may impact their interactions and actions. She tied it back to the idea of humanity in that no one is perfect and everyone experiences unpleasant emotions now and then. Sierra discovered that often times teachers tell their students to pay attention, but never teach students how to do this. She taught her students this directly,

In the first lesson I do I ask them how many of them have ever been told to pay attention. It’s like every single hand is up. How many of you have ever been told to calm down? Every single one of them. But has any one ever taught you how to pay attention or has anyone ever taught you how to calm down? We just kind of assume that kids know these things (Interview, 9-15-16).

She realized that she needed to teach her students what their bodies were doing when they were paying attention. She gave them strategies of how to pay attention more often and what to do when they noticed they were losing focus.

The ability to pay attention and understand emotions ties in with social-emotional learning (SEL) which is has gotten more and more attention from schools as something that should be taught. Sierra stated that she saw “mindfulness kind of as the foundation of SEL” (Interview, 9-15-16). She reinforced this idea by stating that before students can learn about conflict resolution, they need to be able to identify their emotions and learn how to deal with them. This identification is the essential first step in learning social-emotional skills. One of these SEL skills is self-regulation. Sierra had previously taught her students about how to identify their emotions and how to cope with them. She realized these lessons had an impact when a student told her a story about how he spilled paint on the floor at his home over the weekend. The student said that before learning mindfulness he would have freaked out but instead he just said, “Okay. I spilled paint. I have to clean it up” (Interview, 9-15-16). He was able to self-regulate and calm himself down after a frustrating experience because he was aware of his emotions. This showed Sierra that students not only understood what she was teaching them, but that they applied her teachings to their personal lives both in and out of school. She was happy that she could teach her students these skills at a young age in hopes that when they encounter problems in the future they would resort to mindfulness instead of unhealthy coping techniques such as drinking. Jane also had this hope that her students, many who have experienced much violence in their lives, would turn to mindfulness instead of violence to cope. Sierra also reflected that, “A big piece of mindfulness is that interconnection with others. What makes me suffer makes you suffer, and what I do impacts you” (Interview, 9-15-16). When

students learned about emotions and self-regulation skills, they were able to understand the idea that their actions impact others. Being mindful of your actions is being mindful of the emotions of the people around you.

Another movement in schools is the increased focus on the mental health of students and staff. All participants believed that mindfulness can help people deal with mental health struggles such as stress and anxiety. Carrie implemented mindfulness breaks in her class to help her students “be more resilient in the face of that stress” (Interview, 9-15-16). She observed that students often had more difficulty dealing with the stress, rather than the content, of assignments. Sierra also noticed her students dealt with stress at school and in particular, when walking in the hallways between classes. She taught her students mindful walking, which she believed reduced student’s social anxiety during the passing periods.

The skills discussed in this section seem to be “common knowledge” skills we expect students to know. However, if no one is specifically teaching students these skills, how can we expect them to demonstrate them? When Sierra explained this predicament, she described mindfulness practices beautifully as,

Coming back to these being such fundamental pieces to being human, paying attention, knowing what we are doing, being able to calm down when we’re upset. Those are some of the most important things that we have to be able to do in order to function in society. Why are we not teaching that deliberately to kids? (Interview, 9-15-16).

Approaches in the Classroom

Through discussions, some participants expressed that mindfulness does not have to take a long time or be a complex process. It can be as simple as just a few moments of quiet. Sierra's students practiced mindfulness for no more than a minute using the "brain draining" technique before taking a test. Students tensed up all their muscles and then released all of their tension. She used this technique before tests, during formal mindfulness lessons, and by simply inviting and reminding her students to practice it whenever they felt stressed so they could calm themselves down. She noted that students were resistant at first saying it was "weird" or "lame" (Interview, 9-15-16) but once they practiced it they became really receptive to it. As stated earlier, walking in the halls was a stressful time for her students so she taught them mindful walking. She also started class ringing a singing bowl and allowing students a minute to relax and let go of stress from the hallway before starting class. Her students enjoyed it and expressed, "Wow. Ring that bell again" (Interview, 9-15-16).

Jane also gave her GED students some time for peace and quiet at the beginning of class by guiding her students through meditations or allowing them to meditate on their own. She acknowledged that her students probably had stressful days and that she was proud of them for still making it to class so she wanted to give them some time to reset. She found that this made them feel that she was on their side helping them trust her and become more willing to do these practices. She also talked to her students about famous people, such as Tina Turner, who practice mindfulness to get students more interested. She was surprised by the positive responses of her students. Some students that she thought would never practice with her bought into it and enjoyed it.

The participants also taught mindfulness strategies to help students pay attention in class and while they were studying. Sierra taught her students lessons on posture and how you hold your body influences the way you pay attention. This is an easy practice that she reminded her students of often. She knew this strategy made an impact on her students when they would come up to her and say things such as, “I was in math class and totally zoning out so I changed my posture and it was so much easier to pay attention” (Interview, 9-15-16). Carrie also taught her students strategies to keep themselves focused when working on classwork or studying as well as strategies to cope with stress that comes from the demanding workload. She felt that her students “generally felt positive about it. I don’t think anybody said anything like, ‘oh this is a waste of time I wish we hadn’t done it’” (Interview, 9-15-16). She did notice that some students felt frustrated doing meditations because they felt that they never got good at it. All of the participants said that they had used curriculum from Mindful Schools, UCLA, or other resources to teach lessons. However, once they got more comfortable teaching mindfulness they also created their own lessons and taught strategies that they thought would benefit their students the most.

There were some themes present in relation to possible barriers to integrating mindfulness into the classroom. One of these possible barriers is parents and staff perceiving mindfulness as teaching students Buddhism, since mindfulness has similar practices to Buddhism. A few years ago a school in the same area as where Sierra taught was ready to integrate mindfulness into the school when two teachers complained that this practice was attempting to convert students to Buddhism. The school then completely got rid of the curriculum. She believes that now after some time and further discussion the school is now going to incorporate the curriculum once again. The participants said they combated this potential

barrier by always using secular terms. Sierra also does not use the prayer position of hands nor says the word “Namaste.” Carrie used a phrase to address this issue with her students, “although the types of meditation practices that we’ll do are Buddhist meditation practices, doing these does not make you Buddhist” (Interview, 9-15-16). By making this clear to the students, Carrie believed it helped her students separate mindfulness practices with religious practices. Sierra discussed possible hesitation by administrators with integrating mindfulness into their schools as well as some hesitation from parents. She contended that,

Once they realize that [mindfulness] is about how to pay attention, learning about how to self-regulate. These are just fundamental human skills that we’ve always needed and we see this in virtually every religious and secular tradition probably for a reason. Humans just need to be able to pay attention and self-regulate to be able to function (Interview, 9-15-16).

She believes that after having this discussion as well as listing the benefits, most people accepted the mindfulness program. One reason for this hesitation is due to negative preconceived ideas of mindfulness, which becomes another barrier in itself. Carrie argued that it is easier for younger kids to get on board than adolescents because many adolescents already have ideas about mindfulness that have to be undone. Sierra expressed that once she showed people the research and benefits people began to look at mindfulness in a more positive light.

Time was also a potential barrier that was examined. There were polarized opinions on the question if time was a barrier or not. Carrie believed it was difficult to fit in enough time for mindfulness in her classes. In order for her students to become comfortable with mindfulness practices, she argued that her students needed to practice not only in class with her but on their own time as well. She recognized that even if these practices are brief, it still takes time and

consistency to become comfortable practicing. She guided her students through longer meditations and practices than the two other participants did, which could be a reason for the differing opinions. Jane mentioned that there is always time to do something, we just often chose not to or prioritize other things before it. In her own practice, she often told herself she didn't have time to practice even when she spent a half an hour watching a TV show. She communicated that there is always a way to practice, even if it just for a few moments. Time can potentially be a barrier depending on class time and the length of mindfulness practices.

The final cohesive theme discovered through the interviews was how important mindfulness practice is both inside and outside of the classroom. All of the participants had students thank them for teaching them mindfulness practices and expressed that they were using them outside of the classroom as well. It helped with relationship building as students understood that their instructors cared about their personal lives and health, not just teaching them content. Sierra reflected that, "Teaching mindfulness just felt way more important than teaching the French Revolution" (Interview, 9-15-16).

Summary of Findings

All participants believed that practicing mindfulness benefited their own personal lives as well as the lives of their students. They found improvements in the ability to self-regulate, cope with emotions and difficulties, pay attention, and much more. Although the time needed to teach and practice these skills can be a barrier, all participants said it was worth the time and effort for the benefits it provides. They agreed that teaching these practical life skills to students made the student's lives as well as the teacher's better.

Discussion and Implications

Throughout the interviews, cohesive themes emerged that were supported by the literature. One of the questions researched examined the benefits of integrating mindfulness into the classroom. This research confirmed that mindfulness has a wide array of benefits. One of these benefits is that mindfulness fosters social-emotional learning skills. Black and Fernando (2013) found that mindfulness helps students with their self-control and respect for others. Sierra listed many examples of her students and herself using mindfulness as a self-regulation strategy to calm themselves down. She also agreed that it helped students respect each other because mindfulness teaches students that their actions impact others. These mindfulness skills are executive functioning skills which, Griffen (2015) described as the ability to regulate their own behavior which will allow them to develop greater emotional, social, and cognitive competence. Kuyken (2013) also stated that mindfulness shows promise to bolster adolescent mental health. Teaching students mindfulness builds resilience by teaching them how to better cope and adapt to the difficulties and challenges in their lives (Hahn, 2011). All of the participants taught lessons to address these issues and received positive feedback from the students regarding the effectiveness of these practices. Carrie recognized this while teaching stress management mindfulness techniques to her students when they were in her Advanced Writing Class as well as also dealing with outside stressors and obstacles. Two of the participants noted that they came to mindfulness while dealing with depression as a way to become resilient in fighting their condition without just using pills. The importance of teacher practice was also stated in the interviews and literature for the benefit of themselves and their students. All of the participants went through a formal training on mindfulness practices in order to use these practices in their own lives and teach them in the classroom. When teachers practice mindfulness, they are better

able to manage classroom behavior and maintain supportive relationships with their students (Srinivasan, 2014). Sierra also found that her relationships with students grew once she started practicing mindfulness on her own and with her students.

Another research question posed was regarding approaches educators can use to teach mindfulness. Effective approaches in the classroom were found through this research.

Breathing Exercises

Different breathing exercises were found to benefit students in calming down as well as learning how to pay attention. Participants found that starting the lesson off with breathing exercises or having breathing breaks throughout the day allowed students a moment to reset and regroup so they could be better focused. It also is a way to begin to teach students how to pay attention as focusing on your breathing can bring a wandering mind back to the present moment (Srinivasan, 2014). There are a variety of applications to teach students how to focus on their breathing such as Flowing- Meditation & Mindfulness, Breathing Zone: Guided Breathing for Mindfulness, and Essence- Breathing Relaxation. A teacher could also create a mindfulness area in their classroom where students know that it is available to them at any time during the day to go and calm themselves, which in itself can be reassuring. This area could be as simple as having a beanbag and pillow or could have an iPad, with the applications listed above, available for use. If a school has one-to-one iPads, the Apple Health app could be a great resource as students can track their mindfulness minutes as a motivational tool to keep them practicing. For younger age groups, Carrie suggested having the students lay down and put a stuffed animal on their stomach to learn how to belly breathe as they watch the stuffed animal move up and down. Another idea

she discussed was telling students to act like there was a balloon in their belly. They inflate the balloon on their inhale and deflate on their exhale.

Gathas

Using gathas, a short positive verse to recite, is a strategy that can help give students a more peaceful outlook on things (Srinivasan, 2014). Jane used this gatha in her personal practice and with her students, “May I be happy, may I feel safe, may I be loved” (Interview, 9-29-16). This can be done during a morning meeting, as a brain break, or as needed when students are getting discouraged.

Meditations

Practicing guided meditations can also be easily used in the classroom. Meditation may sound like a complex practice and discourage teachers from integrating it into their classrooms. However, meditation is very simple as Kabat-Zinn stated, “Is about stopping and being present, that is all” (1994, p. 11). Carrie used guided meditations from the UCLA Mindfulness Awareness Research Center in lessons with her students and found that her students enjoyed them. A singing bowl or a bell are other strategies to use while meditating as it signals when the meditation starts and ends. The listener can focus their attention on the sound of the bell to begin practicing.

The last question researched looked for resources educators who are interested in promoting mindfulness practices into their classrooms and schools could use. There were a few general themes present regarding resources.

Teacher Practice

A major theme discussed during interviews was that teachers should practice mindfulness on their own before teaching it to their students. There are a variety of online and in-person trainings available such as Mindful Schools, UCLA MARC Program, and Duke's Mindfulness Training Program. These courses teach participants about mindfulness and also offer Mindfulness Instructor Certification courses.

Mindfulness Curriculum

There are also a wide variety of mindfulness curriculum guides that are available for purchase. Sierra shared examples such as the Mind-Up Curriculum that focused on integrating mindfulness into science curriculum by educating students on the brain. Learning to Breathe is another curriculum that is aimed at adolescents. Carrie suggested a video channel on YouTube titled Zen Den, which leads the audience through guided mindfulness practices and other mindfulness techniques. This would be a great resource for teachers who are just beginning to teach mindfulness.

Books

There are also a variety of books educators can read to introduce themselves to mindfulness and its practices. *Wherever You Go, There You Are* by John Kabat-Zinn is a great resource for strategies to integrate into the classroom such as breathing exercises and meditations. *Real Happiness* by Sharron Salzburg is another quality resource that talks about mindfulness in accessible and understandable terms.

Conclusion

This study had some limitations due to the low number of participants interviewed. For more in-depth research, interviewing more people as well as instructors who have worked with a variety of age groups, would be beneficial. One question that could have been answered more thoroughly through an increase in participants would be if time is, in fact, a barrier to integrating mindfulness into schools. The participants had differing opinions on this issue so interviewing more people could have possibly answered the question.

As the research was completed, a few new questions were raised. One is if mindfulness alone is the reason for the benefits the studies suggest? Could there be other outside factors that influence these positive changes? This is a limitation of mindfulness studies since outside factors cannot be removed. A question that could promote further research is at what age is the best time to start teaching students mindfulness? Carrie shared that she believed it is easier to teach younger children mindfulness than older children who may have a negative preconceived idea of mindfulness. However, can young students truly understand these mindfulness practices? It would be beneficial to know when the optimal time to teach students mindfulness is to most effectively and efficiently teach mindfulness practices.

In summary, this research aimed to explore the process of integrating mindfulness into the classroom. It did so by examining what mindfulness is, the benefits it fosters when utilized in the classroom, simple techniques to practice, and resources to get teachers started on integrating mindfulness. To accomplish this, interviews were conducted with three educators who had taught mindfulness in their classrooms. Practicing mindfulness fosters many benefits to both teachers and students and teaches fundamental life skills that apply to everyone. By integrating mindfulness into the classroom this study shows that teachers and students lives are improved.

They are enriched by the ability to understand the human body, its responses, and what can be done to overcome its negative responses as well as other life challenges in order to live a more peaceful and happy life.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

***Before beginning the interview, I wanted to double check that you received the email I sent with the consent form for participating in the study. Did you receive this form and review it. Do you verbally consent to participating in the study? Would you like to proceed with the interview?**

1. Please first tell me about your professional work in relation to education and mindfulness.
2. How do you define mindfulness?
3. Describe your experiences with mindfulness practices.
 - What first prompted you to explore mindfulness practices?
 - Why are you interested in mindfulness practices?
4. Describe your experiences integrating mindfulness practices into your teaching?
 - Can you give specific examples of how you have integrated mindfulness in your teaching?
 - What were some of your perceptions about the outcomes of integrating mindfulness into your educational setting?
5. What do you think might be the benefits of integrating mindfulness practices into classrooms? What might be the drawbacks or barriers to integrating this into classrooms?
6. What kinds of feedback, support or resistance have you received from parents or administrators about integrating mindfulness into your teaching?
7. What resources or approaches would you recommend to others about integrating mindfulness practices in their educational settings?
8. What would you want other current or future educators to know about mindfulness practices, or specifically how to get started on integrating these practices into their teaching?
8. What else would you like to share about this topic or related to this topic?

Thank you!