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A New Approach to Mindfulness with Teachers

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A New Approach to Mindfulness with Teachers

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Childhood General and Special Education

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Abstract

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This thesis explores the topic of implementing mindfulness programs with teachers in school settings. It begins by exploring the history of how mindfulness has been implemented with students as well as with teachers, revealing the problematic nature of the “mindfulness fad” that has entered into public schools across the country in the past ten years. It also analyzes more recent programs that have begun implementing mindfulness in schools in more productive and responsible ways. The paper then gives a narrative account of a non-traditional mindfulness group that offers an alternative method for training teachers in mindfulness. The group facilitator conducted the group using a Motivational Interviewing (MI) framework as well as a therapeutic groups framework, and tracked participant growth by using the Trans Theoretic Model (TTM), colloquially known as the “stages of change.” At the conclusion of the group, the majority of group members made notable progress towards integrating mindfulness into the fabric of their lives, showing that the method used was efficacious.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Education, Teachers, Schools, Trauma, Disability, Groups, Motivational Interviewing, Transtheoretical Model

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Rationale

Mindfulness training for teachers as a method for supporting teacher pedagogy and student learning may sound foreign, as many educator intervention programs lie in behavior modification for students or skills training for teachers. Mindfulness, as opposed to traditional behavioral modification methods, helps teachers accept, process, and regulate emotions about the current classroom climate (Smith & Jelen, 2016). Mindfulness training has been shown to be a particularly effective intervention for teachers working with high-needs populations, specifically with students who have experienced trauma and students with disabilities, such as autism and ADHD (Rohrer & Sampson, 2014; Jennings et al, 2013).

Students who have experienced trauma function best in environments where they feel safe, and student safety is rooted in how teachers react to student behavior. Students who have experienced trauma often gravitate towards creating chaos in their environment (Souers, 2016). This is because children who have experienced trauma struggle to regulate their “levels of arousal” (O’Neil, 2010, p. 194). Teachers often see disruptive behavior as the students’ “fault,” and take it personally when students behave in inappropriate ways (Rao, 2013, p. 23).

Misinterpreting or overreacting to student trauma behavior can have serious consequences for students. For example, in New York City, school suspensions from 1999 to 2009 numbered 450,000, doubling from the decade before. One of the main reasons for student suspensions from school was student “defiance,” a classic trauma reaction (Dominus, 2016). The act of being sent out of the classroom space often exacerbates the child’s negative behavior, creating a cycle of send-outs and suspensions that causes students to fall behind in academics.

Down the line, frequently suspended students are more likely to end up in prison (Schwartz, 2016). While mindfulness is not a be-all end-all solution to ending school suspensions, in the case of students who have experienced trauma, it can be a helpful intervention. Oftentimes, when a student acts out in class, the teacher feels fear and an acute loss of control, and responds to the behavior strictly and aggressively to regain control (Souers, 2016). In helping students get back on track, it is vital that teachers stay calm when students act out, and avoid getting into power-struggles with students (Crosby, 2015). Whether or not the student acting out has a known trauma history, it is important that teachers respond to all outbursts with equal care and empathy, especially considering that it is not always possible to know every student's history. Furthermore, labels and diagnoses often have more to do with giving teachers a sense of control, as opposed to helping students (Souers, 2016). Preliminary research shows that mindfulness provides the emotional stability teachers need to handle these tough and often emotionally arousing situations (Jennings et al, 2013).

Students with disabilities present a wide variety of needs that are extremely diverse and unique to each individual. Similar to students who experience trauma, structure and consistency are frequently key ingredients that allow students with disabilities to thrive in a classroom environment (Rohrer & Samson, 2014). Also similar to students who have experienced trauma, behavior of students with disabilities can be misunderstood, and they are often suspended at higher rates in comparison to their neurotypical peers. For example, in a Maryland school district, general suspension rates decreased from 2004 to 2015, but suspension rates increased for students with disabilities (Krezmien, Travers & Camacho, 2017). As opposed to the deficit approach of reprimanding or suspending a student, mindful teachers are more likely to see the

strengths in student's disabilities, as opposed to striving to "change" or "cure" them, allowing teachers to provide more personalized and strength-based supports that in turn allow students to thrive in school (Smith & Jelen, 2016, p. 172).

Mindfulness is also a key ingredient in reducing Special Education Teacher turnover rates. Special education classrooms are so demanding that special education teachers experience high incidences of burnout and turnover rates (Smith & Jelen, 2016, p. 173). Mindfulness not only helps teachers stay calm and present in student interactions, but also supports teachers' emotional needs to decrease burnout (Cullen & Wallace, 2010).

This project aims to support teachers who work with students who have disabilities and special needs, including those who may have experienced trauma not only because there is overlap in the needs of these populations, but also because, in some cases, the two are closely related. Trauma has a profound impact on the brain, and different kinds of trauma can yield different results in terms of how students learn. For example, children experiencing maltreatment have more difficulty with social skills and school engagement, and exposure to violence is linked to increased dropout rates in schools (Crosby, 2010). When trauma occurs in early childhood, certain brain structures can be influenced in ways that alter developmental processes for the rest of the child's life (O'Neil, 2010). Since the link between trauma and learning delays is strong, children who have experienced trauma are sometimes diagnosed with learning disabilities. When children get older, it can become hard to tell if disabilities are the result of naturally occurring brain functions, trauma, or a combination of two. For many students, emotionally supportive interventions can be just as an important form of healing as academic ones.

Trauma prevalence is growing. Over twenty-five percent of children “encounter physically, sexually, or emotionally abusive experiences that are perceived as traumatizing” (Crosby, 2015, p.223). In other words, one if four children in a typical classroom have experienced serious traumatic experiences. This statistic alone shows the applicability of this project to all classrooms and populations. However, students of color and of lower socioeconomic statuses have an even higher likelihood of experiencing trauma, and therefore the need for well-trained mindful teachers who work with these populations is becoming increasingly dire (Crosby, 2015). While not the focus of this research, it is vital to note that students of color are also suspended at higher rates in comparison to the general population (Krezmien, Travers & Camacho, 2017). Good mindfulness training for teachers should always include having teachers examine their own biases to ensure they are not inadvertently discriminating against minority students and students of color (Pettway, 2017).

While a mindful teacher has the specialized ability to support high-risk students, in the end, a mindful teacher will benefit all students. All students have unique learning needs and all students experience stressors. Most adults remember a teacher who really saw them, and provided empathy and support through a difficult time, and years later they still remember because it had such a profound impact on their lives (Jennings, 2015). With mindfulness, classrooms are not only a place of learning, but a place of support and collective healing.

Literature Review

a. Mindfulness: History, Definition, and Efficacy

Mindfulness practices can be found in a multitude of spiritual practices and religions, “including ancient Greek philosophy, phenomenology, existentialism,” Western European naturalism, and American transcendentalism and humanism (Brown et al., 2007, p. 212; Moniz & Slutzky, 2016). This literature review and the research that follows focuses on the mindfulness practice that originated in the Buddhist tradition. While Buddhism began developing over 2,500 years ago, the modern Buddhist practice that eventually spread to Western society developed in the colonial period, from the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century (Ditrich, 2016). In the 1970s, Jon Kabat-Zinn secularized Buddhist mindfulness practice in the United States through his introduction of Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School (Ivtzan & Hart, 2016). Since then, secular mindfulness has taken off at a rapid rate in the United States, not only in the field of research, but also integrated into institutional settings such as hospitals, schools, and mental-health centers (Ivtzan & Hart, 2016).

When Kabat-Zinn brought mindfulness to the public sphere in the 1970’s, he created his own Westernized definition of mindfulness that has since been expounded upon by Western mindfulness scholars and researchers. Central to most definitions of mindfulness is a focus on awareness and attention (Brown et al, 2007). More specifically, mindfulness involves purposefully paying attention, in the present moment, nonjudgmentally (Kabat-Zinn, 1990). Part of this close-attention taking involves observing external stimuli objectively; instead of noticing and thinking and categorizing and considering in the habitual way human minds often do, the

observer simply notices, and stops there (Brown et al, 2007). As opposed to placing judgement on outside occurrences or even internal thoughts, the observer is instead encouraged to be curious and accepting of all that comes in; thoughts and feelings are not good or bad, they simply are (Bishop et al., 2004).

According to Mindful Schools, mindfulness can be thought of as a “state, a trait, or a practice”; one can experience mindfulness, one can be described as mindful, and one can actually practice mindfulness in order to enhance presence of mind (Mindful Schools, 2018). Many argue that the only way to achieve mindfulness is to purposefully practice it (Siegel, Germer & Olendzki (2009). Ivtzan & Hart (2016) separate mindfulness meditations into three categories: concentrative meditations, mindfulness meditations, and contemplative meditations.

Concentrative meditation involves letting go of external stimuli by focusing the attention on an idea, object, or state such as breathing. Mindfulness meditation involves awareness of the present by noticing and accepting thoughts and feelings, and gaining an awareness of the self.

Contemplative meditation involves “appealing to a larger spirit (God or a benevolent other) and asking while accepting a state of not knowing” (Ivtzan & Hart, p. 8).

Alongside the increasing use of mindfulness in both private and public institutions, a huge body of research has sprung up about the use and efficacy of mindfulness in a variety of settings and for a variety of purposes (Williams & Kabat-Zinn, 2011). In the field of medicine and psychology, Mindfulness-Based Interventions (MBIs) “reduce stress, promote well-being, make psychological functioning more adaptive, and enhance cognitive functions, including attentional skills” (Jennings, 2015, p. 16). A recent meta-analysis by Goyal et al. (2014) showed that mindfulness programs in the mental health field decreased negative symptoms in

stress-related conditions such as anxiety, depression, and pain. There are also specific treatment programs arising, such as Mindfulness-Based Therapy (MBT), that when used alongside traditional therapies such as CBT and psychodynamic therapy, show moderate improvement of anxiety and depression symptoms (Hoffman et al., 2010).

Beyond specific mental illness, mindfulness has far-reaching positive effects on general mental health and daily living. For example, a recent randomized trial demonstrated that Mindfulness Awareness Practice (MAP) greatly ameliorated sleeplessness in older adults (Black, 2015). Mindfulness has also been shown to alter and enhance how those who practice it perceive themselves and the world around them. Studies show that mindfulness increases awareness of the body, which in turn enhances emotional regulation (Desbordes et al., 2012). Mindfulness also increases flexible thinking and self-reflection, creating a more open form of thought and allowing for the consideration of multiple solutions to problems (Chang, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Colzato, Ozturk, & Hommel, 2012). Lastly, research shows that mindfulness alters the physical structure of the brain in a way that aids “learning and memory processes, emotional regulation, self-referential processing, and perspective taking” (Jennings, 2015, p.17).

b. Mindfulness and Schools- Student Centered

In recent years, there has been a surge in research on mindfulness in schools. Based on a meta-analysis of mindfulness articles Schonert-Reichl & Roeser (2016) performed, there were zero articles on mindfulness in schools in 2000, and 35 in 2012, demonstrating a substantial increase in use and measurement of mindfulness in the classroom. The meta-analysis identified 155 articles that were about mindfulness and education, and even more extraordinarily, a google search on the term “Mindfulness in Education” resulted in 24,000,000 “hits.” There is no doubt

that mindfulness in education is a rapidly growing trend. Following this trend has been a speedy, and sometimes even hasty, implementation of various mindfulness programs in school settings, including “trademarked curricula” for class wide learning, as well as individualized programs for students and small groups (Renshaw & Cook, 2017, p. 3). In addition, mindfulness organizations tailored for implementing mindfulness in schools have formed, including the organization Mindful Schools (Renshaw & Cook, 2017). It is now far from uncommon for schools to integrate mindfulness into different parts of the school day.

While there has been a surge in research, it is too soon to tell whether mindfulness benefits students more so than other interventions such as health care and mental health (Greenberg & Harris, 2012). Renshaw & Cook identify several areas that are lacking in current education mindfulness research: validation of research in biological and psychological processes, testing the “differential effects” of packaged curricula, looking into if/how student “characteristics” effect mindfulness intervention (specifically if student’s cultural values align with mindfulness values). Other areas include studying how mindfulness and other social–emotional interventions are related, looking into “interventionist factors” such as the practitioners knowledge of mindfulness and how often it is disseminated to students, how to transfer mindfulness best practices from a controlled setting to a school setting, and the identification of more specific “treatment effects” (2017, p. 8-9).

While further research in these and other areas is needed, a couple of studies have been published show promising, and more definitive, results. One of these studies is Klingbeil et al.’s (2017) meta-analysis of MBIs with youth, which showed that MBIs were equally beneficial in school and clinical settings, and that mindfulness improved academic achievement, externalizing

problems, internalizing problems, negative emotion, positive emotion and self-appraisal, physical health, and social competence/prosocial behavior amongst those studied. In contrast, Maynard et al.'s (2017) recent systematic review showed that while MBIs show positive outcomes cognitively and social-emotionally, the effect was not significant for behavior or academics. The conflicting results between these two recent meta-analysis shows the great need for more consideration and research into this vast and complex topic.

c. Mindfulness in Schools- Teacher Centered

While there has been much research on general educational settings with children, very little research has been done in regard to doing mindfulness specifically with teachers. In Schonert-Reichl & Roeser's meta-analysis, 25% of articles focused on mindfulness in classroom settings, while only 6% of articles measured mindfulness with teachers, demonstrating a huge gap (2016). In listing possible areas of research currently left out of mindfulness in schools, Renshaw & Cook do not even mention mindfulness with teachers, only sighting other areas of research for children (2017). This may be in part because much of the mindfulness training given to students is often outsourced; practitioners are coming into schools to teach MBI to classrooms and then leaving (Maynard, 2017) .

The lack of research on mindfulness with teachers is problematic, especially considering that many experts argue that mindfulness with students might be fruitless without first training teachers in the contemplative practice. Teachers set the tone for the classroom and students mostly learn social-emotional skills through example and modeling. If teachers are not mindful and regulated, students will not be either (Jennings, 2015). The problem with push-in methods

for mindfulness from outside programs or facilitators, or having untrained teachers lead mindfulness, is that teachers cannot be sensitive to subtleties in student questions and needs. Considering how challenging learning mindfulness can be, it is vital to have a strong and well-practiced leader that students have a relationship with and can trust (Pettway, 2017).

The small body of preliminary research that does exist on mindfulness and teachers, while showing promising results, has many limitations. A literature review done by Hwang et al. (2017) shows that in sixteen articles reviewed, only three reported if mindfulness interventions were disseminated according to plan. Further, none of the studies discussed the quality of methods of intervention, and few gave details of the background and effectiveness of the mindfulness instructor giving the intervention. There are also far too many studies that rely solely on self-report measures; a more holistic view is needed to ascertain the effects of a mindfulness intervention (Hwang, 2017). Hwang et al.'s (2017) assertions echo the issue of hasty implementation of mindfulness in schools; more careful and detailed studies are needed to truly measure the effect of doing mindfulness with teachers.

Despite an overall lack of studies, there are a number of recent studies measuring teacher mindfulness for teacher benefit. A few studies that measure mindfulness with teachers study solely teacher burnout as opposed to how mindfulness with teachers affects students. One of these such studies is Flook et al.'s (2013) pilot study on mindfulness for teachers. The study focuses on how teacher burnout and self-compassion are aided by mindfulness, but does not go into detail about how those teacher qualities affect students. While the study did use a measurement tool called CLASS to see if there was a difference in how the teacher managed the class post-intervention, it did not seem a focus of the study. Additionally, the mindfulness course

given to the teachers only lasted eight weeks. Another such study was Gold et al.'s 2010 research study implementing MBSR in schools for elementary school teachers. The intervention in Gold et al.'s study was just eight weeks as well, and focused on teacher burnout. Gold et al. (2010) outwardly express the need for a "follow-up" period at the end of the study, asserting that mindfulness interventions usually need much longer to really sink in and show positive effects. Gold et al.'s (2010) study also showed promising results in decreasing teacher burnout, but once again made almost no connection to how decreasing teacher burnout affects students.

Studies that measure teacher burnout without in turn measuring student learning miss the central idea that teacher burnout and student learning are inextricably linked. When teachers experience burnout, they often get through the school day by separating their emotions from their teaching, causing levels of empathy towards students to decrease and emotional reactivity to unruly student behavior to increase. When this happens, the overall classroom climate becomes negative and students lose interest in learning (Jennings, 2015). Therefore, mindfulness interventions that decrease teacher burnout, and thereby support teacher emotional health and self-awareness, should also improve student outcomes. Luckily, there are some recent studies that measure the connection between teacher burnout and student learning. Studies that measure how decreases in teacher burnout through mindfulness affect students show improvement in teachers' attunement to student emotional states, and increased teacher empathy towards students who created disruption in the classroom (Burrows, 2015; Bernay, 2014; Schussler, 2015).

Recently, more organizations are cropping up that take a more holistic look at mindfulness, treating teachers and their students as a symbiotic unit. With these organizations has arisen a more comprehensive body of research that is starting to steer the mindfulness fad in

a more positive, well-thought out direction. One pioneer in this area has been Janet Etty-Leal and her meditation Capsules program, which encompasses mindfulness for both students and teachers. Her meditation program starts with thoroughly training teachers in mindfulness over the course of ten weeks before teachers begin to pilot the mindfulness with their students, as opposed to having an outside facilitator train students (Etty-Leal, 2010). A formal research study of Etty Leal's program showed improved student mental-health and wellbeing as a result of teacher mindfulness training (Joyce, 2010).

Another program that holistically trains teachers in mindfulness with the eventual goal of helping students is Jennings' et al. (2011) program: Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE). Instead of training teachers over the course of weeks or months, in the CARE program, teachers get trained over the course of two years, with explicit program outcome goals to not only improve teacher wellbeing, but also to improve classroom climate for students. The CARE program trains teachers in three categories of mindfulness: Emotional Skills, Mindfulness/Stress Reduction, and Caring & Listening Practices, giving teachers not only a well rounded perspective into mindfulness, but also explicit tools they can use to help themselves and help their students (Jennings et al, 2011). In the pilot study Jennings et al. conducted, data was taken in the first year of the two-year program, in an urban and a suburban setting. While in the urban setting there were statistically significant results of improvements in Well-Being, Motivation/Efficacy, and Mindfulness, the improvements in the suburban setting were not as significant (Jennings et al., 2011).

Informal Study

a. Introduction

Through work I do with a non for profit organization, I was asked to run a Professional Development (PD) mindfulness group for teachers at a high needs public school in Brooklyn for the academic year of 2017-2018. I was specifically asked to run the group due to my knowledge of both social work and education as a dual masters-degree student, as well as my training and interest in mindfulness. For my formal mindfulness training, I completed two online courses, “Mindfulness Fundamentals,” and “Mindful Educator Essentials.” I have also had a personal mindfulness practice for the past three years, mostly through Yin Yoga and a regular mindfulness routine at home.

b. Methods

The mindfulness group I ran was radically different from the usual structure of formal mindfulness research studies, and this was in large part due to factors over which I had no control. A notable factor was because of the school schedule, the group I facilitated met once every month and a half to two months as opposed to weekly. Therefore, instead of providing a weekly meditation practice for teachers the way most formal studies do, I instead had to find a way to communicate to teachers that mindfulness was a helpful tool for them, so that the teachers in turn, would be motivated to partake in their own formal mindfulness practice. Secondly, all teachers at the school were required to sign up for a PD group. While most formal studies to date recruit teachers based on interest, some teachers could have signed up for my group simply as a requirement, and about half of participants had little to no interest in mindfulness at the outset of the group. Lastly, communication between the non-profit and the school was inconsistent and

sporadic, meaning that I often did not know when a meeting was going to happen until just days before, and in one case, the teachers did not know about a meeting. The combination of these factors resulted in only three full hour-long teacher PD sessions.

While the non-traditional set-up of my group was a challenge, it also turned out to be a gift. In trying find a realistic and low-budget way to disseminate mindfulness to teachers, I came up with a new model and approach that fits well with the hustle and bustle of life at a high-needs school, and that also reaches teachers without any prior motivation to learn mindfulness. I did three main things to make my new model work. I employed a motivational interviewing framework to move teachers toward change, I used a groups technique to put the onus of learning and engaging with material on teachers, and I created a welcoming, interactive, relaxing, and safe space where teachers could unwind from the day, build community, be vulnerable, and learn from one another. While my background as a social worker and educator, as well as my own formal mindfulness training, all helped me create my group, I believe that other facilitators can use elements of my program in planning and implementing future mindfulness interventions.

The main framework I employed to plan for the group and to measure growth was Motivational Interviewing (MI). With roots in the substance abuse field, MI is a therapeutic technique designed for people in helping profession to motivate others to change. MI specifically employs a conversational technique wherein, with the guide of the helper, “people talk themselves into change based on their own values and interests” (Miller & Rollnick, 2013, p. 4). MI is now being used in a number of settings to help people change in order to have healthier lifestyles (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). An MI framework uses a theory known as the

Transtheoretical Model (TTM), or *stages of change* (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). Key to the stages of change framework is the idea that people will not and cannot make change in their lives until they are ready, and that furthermore, people are often resistant to change that is forced upon them; in order for a true-life shift to occur, change needs to be intrinsically motivated and internalized (Miller & Rollnick, 2013).

In order to understand how MI works, it helps to know the Transtheoretical Model (TTM) that list five stages almost all people go through before enacting a change in their life: precontemplation, contemplation, preparation, action, and maintenance (Prochaska & DiClemente, 1984). In the precontemplation stage, the participant does not believe there is a change that needs to take place. To use the example of someone in a program to quit smoking, in the precontemplation phase, the smoker is fine with their habit of smoking cigarettes and has no intention of cutting back. In the contemplation stage, the participant starts to consider that maybe there is a change that they could make. Using the same example, perhaps the smoker starts to realize that smoking is unhealthy, and in moments begins to imagine cutting back. In the preparation stage, the participant begins to actually make plans to enact the change. The smoker would perhaps decide that starting in a week, they would cut down to two cigarettes a day. The action stage is when the participant actually follows through with the plan, so the smoker would start smoking fewer cigarettes a day. The next and last stage is called maintenance, and in that stage the participant continues to make plans to quit smoking. The maintenance phase is integral to the idea that the TTM is not linear. There is a good chance the smoker in our examples will struggle to quit their habit and may relapse into smoking more again. They may jump back to the contemplation stage, and then forward to the action stage again. The idea of maintenance is that

the person making the change will always need to be actively striving to continue the change they have set out to make.

MI style of conversing and the TTM was central to how I ran my mindfulness groups. As will be described in more detail in the session breakdowns, I listened carefully for “change talk” throughout my sessions to know where in the TTM my participants were, and adjusted agendas, activities, and discussions accordingly. Especially considering how infrequently the group met, my overarching goal was that participants gain a comprehensive understanding of how integrating mindfulness into their own lives helps not only them, but also their students. I only began bringing up the idea of participants having a regular mindfulness practice once I sensed participants were genuinely motivated to do so. In other words, before expecting a shift in behavior, I tried to teach into and create a shift in mindset: the idea that teachers deserve to take care of themselves is a fairly radical idea in modern-day education. Especially when there is so much pressure put on teachers to help students in such a myriad of ways, it is so easy for the teacher’s awareness of self to fall to the wayside to make more room for focus on students (Jennings et al., 2011). This inquiry was a process in instilling in teachers the idea that they can and should take time to care of themselves, and that self-care was the most important first step not only for their own health, but also for the health, wellbeing, and academic success of their students.

Another practice I used in conjunction with MI was Shulman’s (2011) *theory of group practice*. Shulman proposes that, when facilitating groups, the group will be much more effective if participants feel ownership over the group. In order to give group members agency, the group leader acts less as an authoritative leader and more like a facilitator (Shulman, 2011). In order to

accomplish this, the facilitator tries to connect group members to one another through pointing out commonalities in whatever group members share in the session. This allows group members to see that they have common interests and goals, and they can use each other's knowledge and experience (Shulman, 2011). The group leader also gives group members the chance to answer any questions posed before answering, further creating the impression that valuable knowledge and skills lie within the group. For example, if a group member were to ask, "How is mindfulness helpful for our students?" I may ask, "What do you all think? How could mindfulness benefit students?" Beyond valuing group member knowledge, this method of hearing what other group members have to say, gives the group leader a good sense of where group members are at in the TTM, or stages of change. Finally, the group leader looks around at all group members while sharing is occurring in order to encourage group members to make eye contact with one another, as opposed to just the group leader. The group leader also allows pauses between comments made by group members, allowing group members to respond to one another, and for conversation to naturally flow (Shulman, 2011). Considering that this group did involve an educational component, I spoke more than I would have in a purely therapeutic group, but also tried to implement the above practices as much as possible.

Group practice works especially well with MI because, as MI theory states, in group practice, it is always more powerful when statements of change come from group members instead of group leaders (Wagner & Ingersoll, 2017). For example, if the group leader were to outright tell group members, "mindfulness will assist you in many aspects of your life outside the classroom," the statement may fall flat. Group members may not be able to envision how mindfulness could help them, and may feel overwhelmed at the idea of integrating something

new into their lives. As an alternative, the group leader could simply pose the question, “How do you see mindfulness affecting other parts of your life?” One group member may say, “I’ve been so busy I haven’t thought about it.” And another may say, “Actually the other day, I was in my kitchen and stressed and I remembered my mindful breathing, and just taking a moment really helped me.” The back and forth in that dialogue is key: perhaps the first participant will find themselves stressed, remember what their peer said, and try mindfulness breathing as well, or do something else to take care of themselves in that moment of stress. Good group practice and stages of change go hand in hand. It is important to note that both MI and Group Practice are therapeutic interventions. While the group I facilitated was not a therapy group, I simply used the guidelines of each practice to empower, support, and challenge participants of the group to self-determine outcomes.

The last thing I did to try to make this group useful and accessible to the group was to make it as relaxing and enjoyable as possible, while still maintaining the seriousness of the task at hand. Considering all the PDs teachers are required to attend, I did not want my PD to become just another chore, where someone would talk at them, and they would sit and slowly disengage. One thing I did to prevent this from happening was to change up the location of the PDs: after the first session, all the PDs took place in the school’s sensory gym. I set up the room to put foofs (large bean-bag like chairs) in a circle, interspersed with mats, exercise balls, and folding chairs, so everyone in the group could be comfortable. Another thing I did was strive to integrate a hands-on activity into each session to promote interest and active engagement.

c. Procedure

The original plan for this group was to survey teachers to measure emotional reactivity. However, a number of factors related to bureaucracy prevented the regular dissemination of surveys to occur, so instead, I have included my own narrative account of what occurred in each session below, and what I accomplished as a facilitator to move participants through the stages of change. In order to create the following narrative account, I took copious notes following each session, writing down as much as I could about general themes that arose, as well as specific things participants said to show change. In the actual write up, none of the quotations provided are verbatim reproductions of what group members said, rather, they are paraphrased and generalized for purposes of anonymity. Additionally, most participants signed a consent form. Participants that did not sign a consent for are excluded from the data below.

The group consisted of ten staff members, including head teachers, cluster teachers, and paraprofessionals. There were four head teachers, five paraprofessionals, and one gym teacher. Every mindfulness group occurred on a Monday after school starting at 2:45 pm and ended at 3:45 pm.

d. Results and Analysis

Session #1: Intro to the Professional Development: October 16, 2017

This first session was a bit haphazard considering the fact that the Executive Director of the non-profit I work for and I did not know it was happening until hours before it began. This was the first in a series of bureaucratic challenges that this endeavor faced. For the first session, the Executive Director gave an introduction describing her connection to the school and the teachers there, and her desire to provide support to the teachers at the school. She also discussed

her experience with mindfulness and how it has impacted her life. Next, we went around, and each participant shared what they wanted to get out of the group. Almost all participants shared that they wanted better strategies to deal with students they perceived as unruly, or hard to manage. Once they shared, I gave a brief review of the goals of our group, making it clear that the group would focus on mindfulness for teachers first and foremost, but also, depending on progress, there may be opportunities towards the end of the group to begin practicing mindfulness with students. I also started an introduction to the idea that a mindfulness practice for teachers could very possibly already begin to help teachers with student behavior and conflict.

Session #2: Intro to Mindfulness, (Precontemplation): November 20th, 2017

This second session involved a general check-in, a short discussion about confidentiality, a community building activity, a mindful listening meditation, a meditation debrief, and a discussion on what constitutes mindfulness. The check-in, which was how I started every group, was a way for me to gauge where participants were in their stage of change, and more specifically, what had been on their minds since the last session. I left this first check-in fairly open ended to see what participants would bring to the space. One participant launched into talking about mindfulness (without prompting), and specifically, a student in their class who struggles with behavior. A few other participants eagerly joined the conversation, and I reinforced moments when participants were taking note of their feelings in relation to the students they were discussing. Only one participant chose to share something outside the realm of the school building, mentioning a celebratory event in her life.

The community building activity activity was a simple, strengths-based activity meant to be fun, but also bond the group together and help them get to know one another as people with lives outside the school building. Participants broke into pairs and shared languages spoken, favorite place to travel, special talents and interests, and a famous person they would like to meet. Then, each participant shared out to the group about their partner, allowing the group to learn something new about everyone present. Throughout the activity, participants smiled and laughed and seemed to settle more into the space.

Next was the group's first meditation. I led a listening meditation, slowly leading the participants into paying more attention to the sounds they could hear around them. Afterwards, I led an open reflection, meaning I asked participants what they thought of the meditation without any other prompting. Participant had profound reactions to the meditation, delving deep into what slowing down and being mindful felt like. One participant expressed they felt as if they were "letting the day go." Some participants also mentioned that it was hard to relax while listening to the sounds of the school building. This was an opportunity for me to pose the question, "Does meditation always have to be relaxing?" and was a segway into a discussion on what mindfulness is. I let participants try to define mindfulness first, in part to engage them in the question, and in part to get a sense of what they knew and any misconceptions they had before I offered a definition. Then, I offered a definition of mindfulness and gave participants some time to reflect. The concept participants grappled with most was non-judgmental awareness. They all seemed concerned about somehow doing mindfulness wrong. This is a misconception that arose throughout the inquiry project, and that I worked to continually address.

To wrap up, I asked participants if there was something they wanted to think about and work on in the time in between sessions. Participants were still thinking about mindful listening, and began to talk about students and people in their personal lives to whom they often struggle to listen. I prompted the group to try not to change or alter those situations, but simply to pay more attention to how they were feeling when they were struggling to listen to, and engage with, a student or someone from home.

Session #3: Interim with 4 participants, (Precontemplation) December 11, 2017

This session was shorter than the other sessions because this time, teachers did not know about the PD until right beforehand and so only four people showed up. The agenda for the day consisted of check-ins, a mindful eating meditation, and a wrap-up conversation.

For the check-ins, participants dove right into discussing the topic we had decided to end last session with; they described vivid and visceral moments when listening was difficult, especially in respect to students who had a tendency to talk on and on. Participants were still perplexed by the idea of paying more attention to their feelings in the moment, but not trying to fix the situation in any way. Furthermore, they were confused about how that activity related to mindfulness. I gave minimal answers and continued to reflect questions back to the participants to see what they thought. That information showed me that participants were still in precontemplation, and had not fully integrated the core concepts behind mindfulness. The check-in conversation also showed me that I would need to do more work defining mindfulness in the next session.

For the meditation, I did a mindful eating exercise where I prompted participants to observe, feel, smell, taste, and eventually swallow a raisin. Participants were all engaged during the meditation, and commented almost immediately afterwards that the meditation felt very strange and uncomfortable to them; they were not used to slowing down and taking so many steps in the eating process. After the meditation, a discussion arose about times in the participant's lives where they naturally felt mindful and calm. One participant mentioned that when they are cleaning- washing dishes, mopping the floor- they feel calm and focused. A couple other participants mentioned that they love art and crafting and even party planning, and always feel regulated and centered when their artistic mind is at work. This led us to the next theme of the week: being mindful of moments we already feel mindful, and soaking in what being present in the moment really feels like. Participants from this small group took initiative in bringing up the theme of mindfulness in daily life in future sessions.

Session #4: Growing the practice (Contemplation and Planning), February 5, 2018

This fourth session consisted of a mirror game activity, a breathing meditation, and a wrap-up reflection.

Because of time constraints, the group was not able to start with the normal check-in this week, but instead, jumped right into an activity I call the mirror game. When playing the mirror game, participants sit and face the partner and "mirror" all of their actions. Halfway through the game, partners switch so each participant can have the chance to be a leader and a follower. When I introduce the mirror game, I also always explain that the goal is not to trick your partner, but to move slowly so that an outside observer cannot tell who is leading and who is following.

Some participants were very serious throughout the activity, and others were giggling and laughing. I did not provide any correctives, I simply observed and participated myself as there were an odd number of participants that week.

After the mirror game, I led an open reflection, and participants had reflective and thoughtful comments. Participants shared how strange and uncomfortable it felt to sit and share attention with another human being for so long. One participant said that they could not help but keep thinking about what was going to happen next. Another participant said that their mind felt calm when they were simply focusing on the actions of one person. After the participants shared their reactions, I offered the idea that the mirror game was a metaphor for life: we often don't share attention with those around us, and we are often planning moment to moment to moment. Mindfulness is when we slow down and really notice what is around us, and don't worry about what is going to happen next.

For the next part of the session, I led an "anchor breath" meditation where participants identified where in their bodies they felt their breath the strongest, put their hand over that spot, and focused on breathing for the duration of the meditation. The discussion afterwards was rich in reflective phrases, and showed that participants were moving from precontemplation to contemplation. The beginning of the conversation involved a lot of comments that showed ambivalence to meditation. Participants said things like, "It is so hard for my mind to be clear when I am sitting," and, "I see why it's helpful, but that felt like a really long time and my thoughts kept running," and "I liked it now but I can't imagine doing that (breathing) when the classroom is so hectic." A key feeling that people often express when moving along the stages of change is ambivalence. While it sounds counter-intuitive, when a person expresses ambivalence

it means they are truly engaging and wrestling with the proposed change (Miller & Rollnick, 2013). While I ensured participants that it is okay for meditation to feel uncomfortable and not calm at all, I was excited to hear that participants were really delving deep and talking to each other honestly about the challenges of meditation.

After validating and normalizing the feelings of group members, the conversation shifted, and participants started to engage in “change talk,” which are statements that show participants are considering making a change. One participant pushed, “But how would you do this in the classroom, when everything feels out of control?” Another participant shared a story of something that happened that day, when the class felt out of hand, and at the end of the story, concluded that the only thing to do is to wipe the slate clean and start fresh every day. Another teacher agreed, “Yes, that is what we do every day, moment to moment, you just gotta forget what happened in the last moment and move onto the next moment.” Possibly without consciously realizing it, the group was describing mindfulness: present awareness. Together, they made the connection that they already used mindfulness in their lives. When group members realized that, in many ways, mindfulness was a technique they were already using, many of the group members jumped from precontemplation to contemplation straight into action. Since mindfulness was something they already did, but that they could expand on it and use it in their own lives.

One member of the group continued the thread of the conversation: “It does really come down to how you are with the kids.” Another chimed in, “It’s true, when I’m frazzled, the class is frazzled, and usually if I can be calm, the class is also calm.” The group had begun internalizing the idea that their class would not be able to be mindful until they modeled it as

teachers. One group member pushed back on the idea that teachers can be calm in the classroom space, allowing the group to once again process and wrestle with the new way I was asking them to think. She said, “I honestly only ever feel calm like that when I am running.” That was another moment for me to reinforce that one of the best ways to practice mindfulness can be while doing an activity that is already relaxing for participants.

To wrap up the group, I asked group members to think of times in their life when their minds felt clear, and they felt present in the moment. Some group members shared times they feel mindful (cooking, driving, drinking coffee in the morning...), and the four group members who had attended the previous session jumped in with their knowledge on the topic. As our challenge for next session, I asked group members to practice mindful breathing in those moments when they already felt mindful, and just to be aware of how that felt for them.

Session #5: Group Interim, February 25, 2018

I unfortunately was not able to complete the session I had planned for this day because when I arrived, I was told that in lieu of an inquiry session, all the teachers were gathering to present what they had done so far in their inquiries. So instead, I presented to the staff of the school what I was doing in the inquiry group I was leading. To do this, I led a short meditation with the teachers, and let them reflect on what slowing down for a moment felt like. Teachers gave enthusiastic responses, agreeing that they often forget to take care of themselves. A couple teachers even mentioned that they use GoNoodle (website that has activities for children) classroom meditations with their whole class (GoNoodle, 2018). This was a good segway into

me explaining the rationale behind my project, which was having teachers develop a regular meditation practice before introducing it with children.

Session #6: Ubiquitous Mindfulness (Action) April 9th, 2018

The goal of this last mindfulness session was to give teachers the opportunity to really understand why having their own mindfulness practice is vital before introducing mindfulness with their students. The session consisted of a reflection, a short video, a meditation, and the wrap-up.

I began the session by doing a reflection, and was shocked that after two months since meeting, teachers had really been integrating mindfulness into their daily lives; they were creeping into the action phase. Teachers mentioned practicing mindful breathing while driving, taking their morning coffee, running, and even in stressful moments in their classrooms. To push participants into the next phase of the group, I prompted participants to think about times when they were not feeling mindful, and what that feeling was like. Participants dived deep into the topic, discussing moments with students as well as moments from their personal lives where their bodies and minds did not feel in control. Interestingly, participants bonded over having rescue dogs, and how hard it was for them when their dogs, who had often been abused or had traumatic lives, lashed out at others or behaved badly, and how scary it was to feel out of control in those moments. I connected those feelings of fear and shame to moments when students act out, and teachers feel afraid and responsible to right the situation.

The conversation about rescue dogs was a perfect segue into the next part of the group: I brought in a short TED talk for participants to watch and use for reflection. The TED Talk was about a woman who worked with formerly abused horses. The woman giving the talk, Koelle

Simpson, tells a story of a time when she was not able to connect with a horse that had been very badly abused. She began to doubt herself, and resort to trickery and bribes to befriend the horse. The woman later realized that she could not make the horse trust her when she was feeling self-doubt and fear, and needed to give herself compassion and gain self-assurance before she could form a relationship with the horse. Once the woman centered herself and her emotions, the horse came right to her (Simpson, 2011).

The group had powerful reactions to the TED Talk. When I first asked them what they thought the message of the talk was, a few spoke about how teachers have to be calm for students. For one of the first times in the group, I directly pushed back on that idea by asking, “Is that even possible? To be calm all the time? That is a lot of pressure.” The group agreed that trying to be calm would be hard. I pointed out that trying to be perfectly calm and centered for student all the time could lead to the same self-doubt the woman in the video experienced. Instead, I pointed out, the woman healed when she took care of herself, and then was able not to be calm, but present and sure of herself.

Group participants connected with and discussed ideas of self-care and care for others. One participant shared how deeply she feels she wants to be there for all students; even if what students are upset about seems minor, she wants to always be present for them. Another member agreed, but also chimed in that it is hard to be there for students during periods where she is facing challenges in her personal life; “It is too much to feel all at once,” she said. The group began to agree on the idea that more control over the mind and increased emotional regulation would be helpful. When teachers were explicitly asking for strategies to be more regulated in the classroom, I knew they were ready for the second phase of the change I was hoping they would

make. I told the group that since the times we most need mindfulness are really the times when it is hardest to be mindful, like when we are angry or upset or hurt, many people practice mindfulness regularly to hone the skill of non-judgmental awareness, so that it is already there when they need it. Heads in the room nodded and I believe the idea was starting to click.

I used the idea of having a regular mindfulness practice as a segue into our meditation for that day. I gave the participants the option to sit for the meditation, or to walk in an adjoining room where they could hear, since some participants expressed that they are better able to be mindful when moving. Since many participants had been sharing the feeling of being flooded with thoughts when meditating, I gave participants three different strategies for working with thoughts and feelings while meditating. First, I taught them labeling, saying that whenever a thought or feeling comes into their mind, they can label it as “thinking” or “feeling.” After giving participants silent space to practice this interspersed with examples, “*Later I want to....thinking,*” I introduced new strategy. Then, I told participants that if labeling did not feel right to them, another thing they could do was narrate to themselves what was happening in their mind by saying to themselves, “*Now I’m thinking about my grocery list... Now I’m feeling anxious... Now I’m breathing deeply.*” I told them that both strategies were meant to help distance them from their thoughts, to observe them from afar, like watching thoughts and feelings pass like cars on the highway. Lastly, I told participants they could repeat a mantra, a simple word or phrase, in their mind to bring a central focus, such as, “*May I be relaxed*” or simply, “*Empty, empty, empty...*” Between directions, I gave lots of silent time for participants to try out these different strategies.

After closing out the meditation, I continued my pattern of simply asking participants how the meditation was for them. As in the other sessions, the participants' responses were deep, reflective, varied, and honest. One participant said that she found the labeling technique helpful, that she had struggled with knowing what to do with her thoughts before. Another participant mentioned that even though her body felt relaxed, her mind was flooded with thoughts; she felt she was meditating "wrong". Others agreed. I reinforced that it is completely normal for the mind to be flooded with thoughts, and I mentioned again that the experience of being flooded decreases the more one meditates, which is part of the reason many people have a regular mindfulness practice. My comment led to an interesting discussion about what it would mean for group members to slow down and meditate regularly. One group member hypothesized that one reason mindfulness is so hard is that it completely goes against how the culture is set up. In American culture, everyone is always going, going, going; taking breaks to sit and do nothing is almost unheard of. Another group member agreed, they could barely imagine taking five whole minutes out of the day where they were not trying to be productive or accomplish something.

When I heard group members discussing what it would feel like to have a regular meditation practice, and wrestling with what it would feel like to stop and slow down on a daily basis, I provided some resources, mentioning a meditation app called Buddhify that was only five dollars and had a lot of great meditations to choose from. Then and there, five participants pulled out their phones and downloaded the app, others writing the name in the phones. There in front of me, I saw half of my participants take action for change after only three full sessions.

I asked participants what they wanted to work on for next session, and after a long pause, one participant asked if they could start practicing mindfulness in their classrooms with their

students. Other participants chimed in that they would like that as well. I told participants that if they want to do mindfulness with their students it was very important they practice it on their own, but that if they felt ready, I would email along resources. Five participants added their names to an email list to receive resources.

e. Discussion

I was surprised at how far along the phases of change participants traveled. Considering that the whole group only met three times for full sessions, it is almost shocking that participants so readily grasped ideas of mindfulness and were ready to integrate mindfulness practice into their lives at the conclusion of the group. In a world where time is limited and resources scarce, it is of note that, with the right intervention, so little time is needed to help teachers adapt a basic mindfulness practice. Part of the reason teachers eventually consented to beginning their own mindfulness practice at the conclusion of the group could have been the very fact that the group did not provide a weekly mindfulness practice; instead of seeing mindfulness as something done in a workshop, participants got the message that if they wanted to use mindfulness, they would need to eventually take charge of their own mindfulness journey.

Another aspect of the group that was surprising was how much teachers remembered and internalized from session to session, especially considering that sessions occurred so infrequently. I believe that part of the reason for how much teachers remembered from session to session was the emphasis on conversation and reflection throughout the course of the group. Thinking about and then discussing the intricacies of mindfulness left an enduring impact on group members, so that by the end of session they had internalized central ideas and concepts.

This process of internalization allowed group members to continue using and contemplating mindfulness in their lives outside the group, and allowed them to come to group ready to discuss all they had seen and observed.

If I could run this group again, something I would have done differently would have been to give the group more time to think about how to apply what they were learning, based on their individual roles at the school. Half of the group was made up of paraprofessionals, and while some of the paraprofessionals shared in group very frequently, a couple barely spoke throughout the course of the group. While it is normal in a group setting to have participants who prefer to listen more than talk, I wonder if I had given participants the chance to reflect what they were learning as it related to their role at the school, if my two or three quieter participants would have been more actively engaged in the group.

Conclusion

The research I completed, and the group I facilitated, revealed to me the intricacies of integrating mindfulness in schools, and specifically, mindfulness with teachers. The most important lesson I gleaned from this project was that, above all else, teachers need to buy into the idea that their own self-care is a key component to caring for others, before they can truly integrate mindfulness into their lives and their classrooms.

Although my personal account of the mindfulness group I facilitated lacks both validity and reliability, and is highly-biased considering that I was a participant, I believe it still holds value for other mindfulness facilitators who are looking for new ideas on how to train teachers in mindfulness, and also could be used as a framework for a future study. I hope that future

mindfulness facilitators can learn from pitfalls I encountered, and mistakes I made as a facilitator. More importantly, I hope that future mindfulness facilitators can glean wisdom and helpful tools from my account. Lastly, I will consider this project a success if I convinced even one teacher that caring for themselves will in turn help them care for their students.

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