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Mindfulness-Based Practices for Schools

Mindfulness has been defined as "maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, emotions, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment with openness and curiosity" (Mindful Schools, n.d.). Mindfulness practices essentially cultivate attention, including self-awareness and self-knowledge of thoughts, feelings, sensations, and how they affect one's actions. Mindfulness is a promising approach to teaching educators and students self-awareness and self-regulation skills associated with success in school and through adulthood. In addition, mindfulness skills are complementary to social and emotional learning (SEL), as self-awareness and self-management are among the five core skills of SEL identified by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL).

Mindfulness is connected to improving executive functioning, the mental processes that take place in the prefrontal area of the brain and enable a person to plan, focus attention, remember instructions, and juggle multiple tasks successfully (Flook et al., 2010). Executive functioning is core to academic success and the ability to make healthy choices (Harvard Center on the Developing Child, n.d.). The strategies employed in school-based mindfulness practices are largely drawn from mindfulness-based stress reduction and mindfulness-based cognitive therapy, which have been validated for reducing anxiety and managing stress (Marchand, 2012).

Mindfulness practices can be taught as stand-alone strategies for teachers' own benefit and/or for use with students, and can be integrated into existing school structures and routines. Practices can be integrated by individual teachers, adapted to fit the needs of individual students or groups of students, or implemented as a schoolwide commitment to well-rounded education focused on the whole child, teacher well-being, and positive school climate. This brief describes the benefits of mindfulness-based practices and describes some

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common universal and targeted strategies for use in education settings, based on research and on best practices of prominent organizations that focus on mindfulness.

Benefits for Teachers and Students

There is an emerging evidence base demonstrating the benefits of mindfulness for people of all ages in domains related to physical and mental health, as well as education. For example, equipping teachers with mindfulness and other stress management skills may be linked to significant gains in educators' job satisfaction, as well as in self-regulation, self-compassion, and skills such as observation, nonjudgment, and the ability to be nonreactive (Frank, Reibel, Broderick, Cantrell, & Metz, 2015). Teachers whose behaviors are "calm, clear, and kind" might yield more compassionate environments for students (Jennings, 2017). Given the demanding context of the school classroom associated with epidemic levels of teacher burnout, effective stress management by educators can also yield benefits for students.

Research has linked mindfulness-based practices with outcomes indicative of a positive school climate, including:

- Cultivation of compassion and empathy, which can impact how comfortable and welcome students feel at school (Birnie, Speca, & Carlson, 2010)
- Increased well-being, positive emotion, popularity, and friendship (Miners, 2008)
- Improved self-regulation (Flook et al., 2010)

Research linking mindfulness practices to academic improvement has also demonstrated:

- Reduced test anxiety (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005)
- Increased student focus and concentration on cognitive tasks in the classroom (Ortner, Kilner, & Zelazo, 2007)
- Improvement in reading competence (Jennings, 2018)

Quick Wins: What Teachers and Other Adults Can Do Right Now

One of the most direct ways for educators to promote the benefits of mindfulness and stress management is to focus on their own self-regulation. Educators can:

- Read educator-focused books by experts, such as Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom (Jennings, 2015); The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students (Rechtschaffen, 2014); and Mindfulness in the Secondary Classroom: A Guide for Teaching Adolescents (Broderick, 2019).
- Gain valuable skills in stress reduction and in understanding their own experience through apps such as Calm and Stop, Breathe & Think.
- Learn about the science of mindfulness and how the brain responds to stress.
- Seek out trainings in mindfulness-based stress reduction, which are available nationwide.

Universal Supports: Schoolwide Policies, Practices, and Programs

The research on mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) in schools is steadily growing and has documented that MBIs are a promising approach for supporting students (Renshaw, Fischer, & Klingbeil, 2017). However, the current evidence base relies on studies of specific mindfulness *programs*, which typically consist of specific practices and skills within a curriculum. Most MBIs aim to reduce stress,

regulate emotion, and improve self-awareness. Practices that are common to many MBIs include deep breathing, body-centered awareness (e.g., focusing on feeling the feet on the floor), mindful movement, pausing before speaking, practicing compassion for peers, and guided relaxation. There is, however, a lot of variability in implementation of MBIs, such as in terms of program length (Felver, Hoyos, Tezanos, & Singh, 2016). The evidence base for MBIs with children and youths is not developed enough to provide definitive recommendations about *specific practices* within mindfulness approaches and programs. However, common characteristics of rigorously evaluated programs suggest that MBIs can contribute to positive results at both the school and individual levels (Zenner, Herrnleben-Kurz, & Walach, 2014). The following strategies are often part of schoolwide implementation of mindfulness-based interventions and practices.

Integrating mindfulness throughout the school day

- **Start class with a "mindful moment"** to create a deliberate pause for students to slow down, quiet their nervous systems, and check in with any feelings or thoughts that might need attention as they settle in to learn. This mindfulness activity can be done in stillness (e.g., students are guided through sitting and noticing their bodily sensations, such as their feet on the floor) or through slow and deliberate movement (e.g., students are guided through standing movement in which they pair a series of deep breaths with movements such as raising their arms over their heads and down to their sides).
- **Teach students to pause before reacting to something perceived as provocative or charged.** For example, teachers can model taking three deep breaths before responding to something that stirs up challenging emotions.
- **Help students understand that a calm mind and a calm body increase awareness of one's thoughts and feelings,** which in turn can promote empathy and compassion for others and enable a welcoming and inclusive school culture.
- Ensure that norms and expectations of classrooms and the school reflect **a culture that encourages self-reflection and development of self-awareness.**
- Provide students with **space and permission to pause and reflect on their experiences.**

Identifying evidence-based mindfulness programs to match strengths and needs

- **Select a specific program or individual mindfulness strategies, based on a needs assessment or analysis of schoolwide data** to determine how to best implement MBIs and/or practices, for what reasons, and to what ends. For example, are there certain points in the day when behavioral reactivity tends to increase (e.g., transitioning from recess to an academic task)? Are there individuals or subgroups of students who are showing difficult behaviors or difficulty with attention? What strategies are developmentally appropriate for the intended grade levels?
- **Select programs and curricula that research has shown to be effective,** such as the following:
  - » The ".b" curriculum and related courses by the Mindfulness in Schools Project have been validated by several studies (Sanger & Dorjee, 2016).
  - » Learning to BREATHE is a mindfulness curriculum for adolescents that has also produced good student-level evidence (Metz et al., 2013) and is delivered through a program lasting 6–18 sessions.

- MindUP is a program for students aged 3–14 that has been shown to increase prosocial actions, decrease aggressive behaviors, and improve academic achievement (*Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015).*

Helping educators implement mindfulness programs and practices

- **Train teachers to directly facilitate mindfulness activities** in their own classrooms or to provide trainings for their fellow educators, using resources such as the following:
  - Mindful Schools provides research-based courses, curricula, trainings, and certification programs specifically designed for under-resourced public schools facing high turnover rates and high levels of stress.
  - The Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE) program is intended to increase prosocial behavior by improving educators' well-being; improving educators' abilities to provide emotional, behavioral, and instructional support to students; improving relationships between teachers and students, and improving classroom climate; and increasing students' prosocial behaviors (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).
  - The Mindfulness in Schools Project provides training for educators working in contexts serving students aged 7–18, and has online courses and other offerings available to school mindfulness leads and other educators, parents, and community members.
- **Ensure that school leaders make mindfulness a part of their approaches to leadership and instructional support.**
- **Integrate mindfulness practices into coaching sessions** in order to equip teachers with self-regulation and stress-reduction strategies as well as specific student-focused strategies for classroom management.
- **Extend professional development in mindfulness to all teachers** in a school, via a train-the-trainer model (such as that of Mindful Schools), and **integrate mindfulness activities into staff routines** (such as by modeling, teaching, and practicing mindfulness strategies in faculty meetings).
- **Share leadership for mindfulness with students.** For example, student ambassadors can receive training from mindfulness instructors and can be made available for de-escalating conflict between peers.
- **Monitor and reflect on effectiveness of programs and practices** by examining whether educators are modeling the desired strategies and behaviors for students and whether interventions have made an impact on articulated goals (e.g., reducing test anxiety).

Targeted Supports: Intensive Supports for Students

Mindfulness practices can be suitable for more intensive interventions for students, provided that educators know how to adapt approaches for students who face risk factors such as trauma, as there is some evidence that adverse effects may occur when mindfulness instruction is delivered to "at-risk" populations without understanding of how trauma can affect students' experiences (Himelstein, 2020). As with any intervention, it is critical for mindfulness practices to be responsive to the student experience and to empower students to choose not to participate if it does not feel safe to do so. Some intensive supports include:

Addressing conflict

- **Use mindfulness in restorative justice settings or other facilitated activities intended to**

address interpersonal conflict in schools. In these contexts, "mindful listening" can be done in pairs or small groups and requires that students take turns as the speaker and listener(s). This listening exercise requires listener(s) to not interrupt while the speaker is talking and to practice focusing their attention entirely on what the speaker is sharing. After the speaker has shared, listener(s) may respond from their perspectives, based on what they heard.

Supporting students facing additional challenges

Though all students may benefit from schoolwide mindfulness efforts, specific mindfulness strategies may be particularly effective for individuals or student groups at higher risk for health challenges and/or educational failure, such as those exposed to chronic stress due to community violence, food insecurity, or experiencing homelessness (Eva & Thayer, 2017). Additionally, evidence from studies of mindfulness programs with youths suggests particular promise for youths with high levels of psychological symptoms such as depression and anxiety, and that implementation and adaptation of mindfulness in educational contexts serving youths showing these symptoms may yield significant benefits (Zenner et al., 2014).

- **Teach basic body awareness.** Often, young children do not distinguish between sensations in their body and the thoughts and feelings that are connected to those sensations. Educators can help children become aware of sensations by leading a group activity to direct attention to a presumably neutral part of the body, such as the feet. Educators may also ask each child to respond to a prompt such as: "Right now in my body I feel . . ." Similarly, when working with children to identify if they are hungry, sleepy, or perhaps need to use the bathroom, teachers can prompt students to "ask your body if . . . [e.g., you need to go to the bathroom]."
- **Use calm rooms, quiet spaces, and sensory rooms as an alternative to exclusionary practices.** The Holistic Life Foundation in Baltimore combines yoga and body awareness for youths and has effectively utilized a Mindful Moment Room for students to visit in order to co-regulate with a trained adult (Holistic Life Foundation, n.d.). This intervention includes 5 minutes of targeted discussion and a facilitated 15-minute mindfulness exercise. This particular targeted support has provided schools with an alternative to discipline referrals and suspensions.
- **Follow guidelines for supporting students with a history of trauma or adverse childhood experiences.**

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