Exploring Mindfulness: The full teacher experience

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EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

Abstract

Mindfulness has been a prime topic of discussion in the field of education for the past decade. The practice of a conscious effort to be present, without judgment, has proven to provide individuals with many benefits outside of the traditional, religious Buddhist setting. This qualitative study aims to further explore the well-documented benefits of mindfulness to a teacher’s professional practice. In contrast to the majority of research studies on mindfulness, which focus on the effectiveness and feasibility of mindfulness in education, this study adds to the small number of existing qualitative studies by providing a descriptive account of mindfulness practice from an in-service teacher’s perspective. The findings from this study reinforce the findings from the existing literature and guide the suggestions for integrating mindfulness training into teacher education and professional development workshops for in-service teachers.

Key Words: Mindfulness, Education, Teaching, Professional Development
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# Table of Contents

**Chapter 1: Introduction** .......................................................................................................................... 6
  1.1 Introduction to the Research Study ........................................................................................................... 6
  1.2 Purpose of the Study ...................................................................................................................................... 7
  1.3 Research Questions ....................................................................................................................................... 8
  1.4 Background of the Researcher ................................................................................................................... 9
  1.5 Overview .................................................................................................................................................... 10

**Chapter 2: Literature Review** ..................................................................................................................... 11
  2.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................................... 11
  2.2 The Rise of Mindfulness ........................................................................................................................... 11
  2.2 Mindfulness Research in Education .......................................................................................................... 12
  2.3 Conclusion ................................................................................................................................................ 21

**Chapter 3: Methodology** ............................................................................................................................ 22
  3.1 Procedure .................................................................................................................................................. 22
  3.2 Instruments of Data Collection: .................................................................................................................. 23
  3.3 Participants ............................................................................................................................................... 23
  3.3 Data Collection and Analysis .................................................................................................................... 26
  3.4 Ethical Review Procedures ......................................................................................................................... 26
  3.5 Limitations ............................................................................................................................................... 27

**Chapter 4 – Findings** .................................................................................................................................. 28
  4.1 Introduction ............................................................................................................................................... 28
  4.2 Teachers’ definitions of mindfulness ........................................................................................................... 28
  4.3 Positive Impacts of Mindfulness ................................................................................................................ 29
  4.4 Implications for the Classroom and students ............................................................................................. 35
  4.5 Mindfulness Influences on Pedagogy and Philosophy .............................................................................. 36
  4.6 Challenges to Mindfulness ......................................................................................................................... 39
4.7 The need to share mindfulness with others

4.8 Summary of Findings

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1 Comparison to existing literature

5.2 Implications for integrating mindfulness into teacher education and professional development

5.3 Limitations and Areas for further research

5.4 Conclusion

REFERENCES

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Letter of Consent for Interview

Appendix B: Interview Questions
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Introduction to the Research Study

Teaching is an extremely rewarding yet equally challenging profession. Educators are responsible for the well being and development of students who have different capabilities, learning styles and cultural backgrounds. In addition to their students, teachers also must answer to parents, the administrative staff, and society as a whole. Furthermore, teachers are constantly adjusting to new standards and educational initiatives, and working to integrate the latest technological innovations into their classrooms. As such, it is understandable that teacher stress and burnout remains a subject frequently addressed in educational research (Harris, 2011; Howard and Johnson, 2004; Kyriacou, 2001; Montgomery and Rupp, 2005).

Teachers play a central role in creating a healthy classroom climate that fosters students’ social-emotional well being; therefore, it is critical to provide teachers with coping mechanisms to reduce their stress and increase their self-efficacy considering the stressful nature of the job. (Flook et al, 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Meiklejohn et al, 2012). In the last thirty years, mindfulness has erupted in the clinical world as an effective method of helping patients cope with all sorts of medical illnesses including cancer, fibromyalgia and various mental health disorders such as depression (Baer, as cited in Meiklejohn et al., 2012). Education has followed suit. MindUP, InnerKids and dot B are some of the organizations that have established themselves to introduce mindfulness practices to students and teachers. Research has shown that mindfulness can increase students’ ability to focus, regulate emotions and cope with anxiety and stress (Kuyken et al., 2013; Napoli et al., 2005; Schonert-Reichl, Lawlor, Oberle and Thomson 2012). Recently, there has been a growing body of research on the positive impacts for teachers who have been through mindfulness-based training. Such studies show that in addition to decreasing teachers’ stress and anxiety,
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

a mindfully trained teacher could be better attuned to their students’ needs, foster more positive student-teacher relationships and improve their classroom management skills (Albrecht, N. J., Albrecht, P. M and Cohen, 2012; Flook et al., 2013; Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

1.2 Purpose of the Study

The primary focus of most mindfulness research has been to evaluate the effectiveness of mindfulness-training programs for teachers and discuss whether or not these programs should be implemented at the policy level (Flook et al., 2013). However, this approach offers only a superficial understanding of how mindfulness could benefit teachers as it is limited in its description. For instance, studies indicate that mindfulness training increases a teacher’s classroom management skills but they do not often describe how mindfulness improves a teacher’s classroom management skills, resulting in gaps in understanding of how mindfulness works.

There are few studies that provide a descriptive account of the effect mindfulness can have on pre-service teachers and in-service teachers who have gone through a prescribed mindfulness training program (Miller and Nozawa, 2002; Soloway, 2011; Thanda, 2011). The purpose of this study is to add to this limited body of literature by exploring the experiences of in-service teachers who have practiced mindfulness, through a qualitative lens. The purpose of a qualitative approach is to gain a comprehensive understanding as to how mindfulness can benefit a teacher’s practice in the long term. Using interviews with teachers to capture teachers’ lived experiences with mindfulness, the study will provide both pre-service and in-service teachers with a more accessible account of how mindfulness can improve teachers’ well being and the classroom environment.

It is important to note that there is more than one working definition of mindfulness. One definition, offered by Sherretz (2011), is the opposite of acting mindlessly;
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

that is to act by considering a problem from different perspectives before choosing how to act. Although the definitions are not mutually exclusive, the definition of mindfulness used in this study is more specific. The words mindfulness, contemplation and contemplative practice will be used interchangeably to indicate: “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p.145).

1.3 Research Questions

The goal of this qualitative study is to uncover the in-service teachers’ experiences with mindfulness in rich, descriptive detail and understand how mindfulness can impact a teacher’s professional practice and the classroom. The questions guiding this study include:

1. How do teachers interpret and/or define mindfulness?
2. Why did teachers decide to incorporate mindfulness into their lives?
3. How do teachers actively incorporate mindfulness into their daily classroom routines and teaching practice?
4. Do the experiences of in-service teachers, who have discovered mindfulness on their own accord, align with the findings of the current research?

The purpose is to capture a comprehensive understanding of mindfulness in the classroom through a teacher's perspective. Rather than solely looking at whether or not mindfulness training is effective, the study aims to show how mindfulness seeps into a classroom and to observe a teachers’ mindfulness personal practices on a day-to-day basis both inside and outside the classroom. The findings are then compared to the existing qualitative research and recommendations and implications made accordingly.
1.4 Background of the Researcher

It is an exhilarating yet scary time to emerge into the teaching profession. As aforementioned, the education system is never short of technological and pedagogical initiatives, allowing for exciting improvements for the best teaching practices. Education is going through a transformation with progressive movements towards holistic education, and an inquiry-driven curriculum founded on the idea of the teacher as “a guide on the side” rather than a “sage on the stage”. As a teacher candidate, I hold these practices to the highest regard; however, the same practices can also seem overwhelming and I sometimes question how I might incorporate these practices into my own teaching.

Furthermore, pre-service teachers will inevitably be faced with an over-saturated job market where more than one in three newly graduated teachers in Ontario are unemployed (Sagan, 2013). Although practicums are meant to be a place to learn and to peek into one’s impending professional career, teacher candidates are reminded that it also serves as a four-week job interview. Not only are teacher candidates faced with a new environment and with new challenges, they are also being evaluated during the process. The life of a teacher candidate can evidently be filled with stress and anxiety, much like the life of an in-service teacher. In the midst of this anxiety driven experience, I have found that practicing what I understand as mindfulness—the practice of yoga, focusing on the present moment and being aware of the control I hold over my negative and positive thoughts—has helped to navigate my way through the challenging experience. I have been fortunate enough to have experienced, first-hand, the positive impacts that mindfulness can have on one’s personal and professional life. I am eager to learn more about the experiences of in-service teachers and how mindfulness might help them cope with the anxiety and stress brought upon by their day-to-day situations.
Roeser, Skinner, Beers and Jennings (2012) claim that the fourth domain to the professional knowledge and skill set for the practice of a teacher is “habits of mind” also known as disposition. Miller (as cited in Soloway 2011) also comments on teacher disposition as he posits that a teacher must endure their own process of professional growth by embracing a mindful way of being in their life and work in order to truly have a holistic approach to education. As a pre-service teacher who is interested in providing a holistic learning experience for students, I am interested in developing a disposition for mindfulness to improve my professional practice. Through the process of collecting teachers’ personal experiences surrounding mindfulness, I hope to gain an in-depth understanding of mindfulness and to share my findings with both pre-service and in-service teachers in hopes that it might encourage them to also cultivate their own mindfulness practice.

1.5 Overview

Chapter 1 included the introduction and purpose of the study, the research questions, as well as how I came to be involved in this topic and study. Chapter 2 contains a review of the literature pertaining to mindfulness in education and more specifically mindfulness training and the benefits that have been observed thus far. It will also identify the gaps in the existing research that this study will address. Chapter 3 provides the methodology and procedure used in this study including information about the sample participants and data collection instruments. Chapter 4 comprises of the findings of the study from a thorough analysis of the interviews. The study concludes with Chapter 5, which includes a discussion of the findings, making connections to literature, implications for the educational field, and recommendations for future studies. References and a list of appendixes follow at the end.
Chapter 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter will provide an overview of past and current research topics of mindfulness and more specifically mindfulness in the educational field. The chapter will start with a brief introduction to the rise of mindfulness in various fields such as medicine and psychology in the past few decades, and then focus specifically on its place in education. Upon introducing the benefits researchers have observed in students who were introduced to mindfulness, the author discusses the findings on teachers who have participated in mindfulness-based training programs. The chapter concludes by highlighting the gaps in the descriptive aspects of mindfulness research on teachers, which this study will aim to address.

2.2 The Rise of Mindfulness

The practice of mindfulness originates from Eastern Buddhist traditions and was introduced to the Western world by Thich Naht Hanh, an influential monk in the 1970s. In 1974 Jon Kabat-Zinn, a molecular biologist, attended a meditation retreat where he learned about the concept of mindfulness. Inspired by this practice, Kabat-Zinn implemented an intervention program for patients at the University of Massachusetts Medical Center in Worcester, where he worked in 1979. The program was called Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) and its purpose was to connect the body and mind to health and healing (Miller, 2014). Since its initial introduction, Western interest in mindfulness has continued to develop and has burgeoned in the last fifteen years. Many researchers have investigated the effect of mindfulness and have found that the contemplative practice can help reduce anxiety (Hofmann et al., 2010), improve the executive functioning of the brain (Zeidan et al., 2010) and can help foster empathy and other pro-social emotions (Birnie et al., 2010).
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

Mindfulness has since been adopted by many disciplines including psychology, healthcare, neuroscience, business, the military and education (Meiklejohn et al., 2012). There has also been significant growth in mindfulness research as demonstrated by the influx of systematic literature reviews on various topics concerning mindfulness-based practices in recent years (de Lisle et al., 2012; Hale et al., 2013; Praissman, 2008; Reiner et al., 2013; Snyder et al., 2012).

2.2 Mindfulness Research in Education

2.2.1 Benefits of Mindfulness training for students

As an increasing number of studies found that mindfulness helped adults who suffer from mental and physical health problems, researchers questioned whether the same benefits could be observed for children and adolescents (Burke, 2009). The mental health of children and youth is a serious concern for researchers, clinicians and educators around the world and Canada has proved to be no exception (Albrecht et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). According to a student and parent census conducted by the Toronto District School Board (TDSB) in 2011, one in five students experience mental well-being issues. Problems with anxiety or depression can seriously impede a student’s ability to perform at school academically and affect their ability to form positive relationships (TDSB, 2013).

Considering this critical trend in our student body, it is promising to see the potential impacts of mindfulness training for students. Both Burke (2010) and Meikeljohn et al. (2012) reviewed the existing research on mindfulness based programs for children and adolescents. The two reviews looked at the results of studies, which used a wide variety of methodologies and comprised of different groups of participants. Some studies were held in clinical settings and others within a school. Additionally, while certain studies looked at the effect on younger children (Napoli et al., 2005) others looked at the effects for early adolescents.
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

(Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012). Some studies had randomized samples (Schonert-Reichl et al., 2012) while others focused on a specific group such as adolescents with attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (Zylowska et. al, 2008). Despite the differences between the studies, there were some observable patterns in their findings. The studies showed that mindfulness could be extremely beneficial for K-12 students. Researchers found students were able to reduce stress and anxiety, increase their ability to hold attention, and increase self-regulation and impulse control after being introduced to mindfulness. Furthermore, it seems that mindfulness could also help students learn more efficiently. Albrecht et al.’s (2012) literature review, which focused more on the effects of a mindfulness practice on teachers, points to studies which show that when mindfulness is “a core ingredient in the students’ learning experience…they are able to transfer material learned to new and novel situations, are more creative and able to think independently.”

Burke (2009) and Meiklejohn et al. (2012) make similar suggestions for future research studies in the field. They both call for a more rigorous, empirical investigation into mindfulness with a more robust methodology including randomized samples and control samples. Along with suggestions surrounding the research design, they also suggest that a standard theoretical framework be developed to shape future mindfulness research on children and adolescents. Moreover, both authors maintain that future research should address the challenges with the implementation of mindfulness in a school setting such as continuing to adapt the mindfulness-based programs to meet the age-related developmental needs of the children and youth, and the need to find trained and experienced mindfulness teachers.
2.2.2 Rationale for developing mindful teachers

Mindful teachers can pass on mindfulness to their students

In order for students to benefit from all of the social, emotional and cognitive impacts mindfulness can have, mindfulness researchers and proponents maintain that it is critical for teachers to develop a personal mindfulness practice rather than just following a resource guide full of strategies (Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Miller, 2014; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Soloway, 2011). Miller (2014) references a discussion with Kabat-Zinn where he mentions that the people who work for his MBSR program each have their own practice. He explains, “if the program does not come from your own work on yourself, then you will not be able to respond to other people and the variety of questions that arise” (as cited in Miller, 2014, P. 124). Like these facilitators, teachers who practice mindfulness in their classroom will also have to answer questions from students, parents and administration. Furthermore, Joyce et al. (2010 as cited in Albrecht et al., 2012) evaluated the effectiveness of a mindfulness program called Meditation Capsules, a program which provides teachers with a textbook and CD to run ten session for building awareness and incorporating mindfulness into the classroom. Some teachers in the study reported feeling ill-prepared to manage students who did not take mindfulness lessons seriously. This finding further supports the need to give teachers adequate time to explore mindfulness themselves, before introducing it into their classroom.

Mindful teachers are effective teachers

Roeser et al. (2012) suggests that having teachers develop a mindful disposition could help improve the overall quality of education. As teaching requires a multitude of complex problem solving skills, as well as the ability to be fully attentive to the students, Roeser et al. (2012) argue that teachers need to develop certain “habits of mind” to manage the demands of teaching. A “habit of mind”, according to Costa & Kallick (2007, as cited in
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

Roeser et al., 2012), is how we respond to complex problems, which are rife in teaching.

Some “habits of mind,” sometimes referred to as dispositions in the literature, relevant to teaching include being flexible problem solvers and being resilient to setbacks. Jennings and Greenberg (2009) support the notion that teachers need to develop certain dispositions to become effective teachers. They emphasize the development of teachers’ social and emotional competence and well-being. Jennings and Greenberg propose that a teacher’s social emotional competence and well-being is linked to a teacher’s ability to develop healthy teacher-student relationships, effectively manage classroom and develop their students’ social–emotional competence. They also suggest a teacher’s social emotional competence is linked with their cultivation of stress management skills. Harris (2011) defines stress management as a teacher’s ability to identify, understand, prevent and address the stress responses to challenging situations that often arise in teaching. If a teacher is able to successfully manage their stress, they will be able to mitigate the possibility of burnout. The research on teachers who have gone through mindfulness-based training, mentioned in the next paragraph, show encouraging potential for mindfulness to help teachers develop the “habits of mind” and stress management skills to become effective teachers.

Miller (2014), an instructor at the University of Toronto for Holistic Education and Spirituality in education, has incorporated mindfulness and meditation practices into his courses for almost twenty years. He lists four rationales for why it is helpful for teachers to develop a mindfulness practice. In this section, three of these rationale are discussed in greater detail. The first is that contemplative practices help to develop “teacher presence” and “being in the moment”, which is critical for meaningful teaching. Kernochan et al. (2007) also promotes the idea that the presence that a mindfulness practice helps a teacher cultivate, ultimately makes them a better teacher:
Mindful teaching brings a new dimension to student-centered teaching. Students reveal their learning needs in their facial expressions and the tone of their voices. When I’m mindful and present, I’m much more likely to pick up these subtle communications from students (P.68).

Secondly, Miller explains that contemplation is a great way to learn about oneself. Vorndran (2009) might argue that this form of self-learning could address the critical component missing from teacher training programs:

In spite of the use of reflective techniques in teacher education, teachers are not trained in a significant way to navigate, negotiate, or manage the issues of identity, the issues of self-belief, the patterns of thought, and/or the emotional patterns, which affect their teaching and their classrooms (P.7).

The last rationale was mentioned previously in this literature review. Mindfulness empowers teachers to handle the stressful situations that occur on a daily basis. In 2002, Miller and Nozawa followed up with twenty-one students who had been introduced to mindfulness in Miller’s course at the University of Toronto and continued to foster their practice. Interviews were conducted with each participant and the data from the interviews, participants’ meditation journals and personal reflections from the course were used to examine the effects mindfulness had on the participants’ lives. All but one student reported the positive impact that mindfulness had had on both their personal and professional lives. The personal implications included feeling calmer and more relaxed, “softening” or becoming more “gentle”, and improvements in their relationships. Some of the professional impacts participants reported were that they felt calmer at work and less reactive in challenging circumstances, such as with a disruptive student.

Lastly, a literature review on mindfulness training for teachers, Albrecht et al., (2012) states that teachers who have been trained in contemplative practices have a better sense of well-being, higher teaching self-efficacy, have better classroom management skills and fostered better student-teacher relationships. These are the characteristics that Howard &
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

Johnson (2004) use to describe resilient teachers, that Jennings & Greenberg (2009) use to describe socially and emotionally competent teachers, and that Harris (2011) suggests teachers need to have to be successful and prevent burnout. In addition to developing resilient teachers with effective stress management strategies, mindfulness training may affect the teaching practice itself. A study conducted by Napoli, Krech & Holley (2005) found that mindfully-trained teachers started to develop a “holistic view of the curriculum” and were able to discern the critical components. This way, teachers were able to avoid being overwhelmed by the burden of trying to cover the entire curriculum. This suggests that mindfulness has the potential to cultivate the dispositions researchers have found to make effective teachers.

2.2.3 Mindfulness training in teacher education programs.

It is evident that mindfulness has promising potential to provide in-service teachers with the tools they need to become competent in their practice. Accordingly, a few researchers have looked at mindfulness training in teacher education programs.

Teacher education programs often neglect the dispositions teachers need to acquire to successfully cope with stress and regulate their emotions (Harris, 2011; Howard & Johnson, 2004; Roeser et al., 2012). To address this need, several professors in the Initial Teacher Education program at the Ontario Institute of Studies in Education (OISE) developed a course in 2006 called Stress and Burnout: Teacher and Student Applications, to address the high rates of teachers who were leaving the profession early on in their career. The course curriculum, entitled Mindfulness Based Wellness Education (MBWE), heavily focused on mindfulness practices. MBWE has two core components: the first is stress reduction and developing well-being and the second is mindfulness practices for the classroom so that teachers learn how to practice mindfulness with students. In a study
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

evaluating the effectiveness of mindfulness for individuals in human service professions, Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, and Karayolas (2008) compared students who went through MBWE training in the Stress and Burnout course to a control group of students who chose an alternative elective. The researchers collected a series of questionnaires from students before and immediately after the course ended. These questionnaires were then combined with interviews from five students, conducted eight months after their MBWE training. An analysis of this data found that the students who took the Stress and Burnout course “exhibited significantly greater increases in mindfulness, life satisfaction and teaching self-efficacy.” Poulin (2009) also reported a correlation between increases in mindfulness and teaching self-efficacy (as cited in Soloway et al. 2011).

Thanda (2011) also led an inquiry on the impact of MBWE training and specifically focused on how mindfulness affected new teachers’ ability to cope with stress. She studied eight teacher candidates from the University of Toronto, four who went through MBWE training and four who were not formally trained in mindfulness. She looked at a variety of internal and external protective factors that affect a teacher’s ability to manage stress: self-efficacy (the ability to meet complex demands of teaching, letting go of need to be a perfect teacher, emotional regulation), adaptive interpersonal skills (collegiality and social support, mentorship, reflection and authentic communication), and resilience to stress (how teachers perceive their teaching environments, openness to trying out new teaching strategies). An interesting conclusion from Thanda’s study was that MBWE-trained teachers tended to rely more on internal protective factors such as emotional regulation and perception of stressful situations to cope with stress than those who had not. This is significant because internal protective factors are arguably easier to control as they do not rely on an individual’s circumstances. External protective factors like the level of collegial or administrative support
are not always easy for a teacher to control. Thanda’s findings are compelling because they suggest that mindfulness could foster a teacher’s internal resources, regardless of their external environment.

In another investigation of the MBWE program, Soloway (2011) suggests that mindfulness can help mitigate some of the challenges of teacher education programs, namely a problem identified by Lortie as the “Apprenticeship of Observation” (as cited in Soloway, 2011). After sixteen years of formal schooling, teacher candidates have a hardwired view of what teaching is, which can limit their ability to take in new teaching methods and ways of thinking about teaching. Mindfulness, Soloway found, can help teacher candidates become more open minded and receptive to the new and reformative teaching strategies presented in teacher education. He also found that the MBWE program helped teacher candidates to develop their personal and professional identities, reflect during a lesson and make changes on the spot as necessary, develop a holistic vision of teaching, and improve social and emotional competence during practicum.

2.2.4 The “How” of Mindfulness

Much of the existing literature on mindfulness in education has commented on the effectiveness of mindfulness-based interventions; however, Shapiro, Carlson, Astin and Freedman (2006) offer a model of mindfulness to explain how mindfulness affects positive change. The article proposes three “axioms” to mindfulness: (1) intention or the purpose, (2) paying attention, and (3) in a particular way or attitude. The authors purport that intentions or personal visions are dynamic and can change with continued practice. Paying attention refers to the ability to self-regulate one’s thoughts and avoids elaborative mental processing of thoughts, feelings and sensations. The third and last foundational piece is the attitude that one brings to the mindfulness practice – for example it could be with compassion and
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

curiosity or with cold, critical thought. When an individual is able to apply all three
“axioms”, they are able to “reperceive”. Reperceiving is the ability observe one’s own
thoughts and emotions and at a distance. For example, instead of being angry and letting
that anger guide one’s behaviour, an individual with a contemplative practice is able to step
back and recognize the anger and choose a course of action with more clarity, perspective
and equanimity. Once individuals are able to reperceive, they can reap the benefits of the
“mechanisms” that reperceiving develops. These four “mechanisms” are: self-regulation,
values clarification (the ability to clarify what kind of values are important to an individual
rather than being conditioned to have certain values by family, friends and society),
cognitive, emotional and behavioural flexibility (creating more freedom between our
emotions and thoughts and our responses), and lastly, exposure (allows individuals to
practice handling strong negative emotions with less reactivity). Shapiro et al.’s insights
provide us with a more descriptive model for how mindfulness works and could be a model
to understand how mindfulness might benefit teachers.

As Soloway (2011) explains: “it is helpful to think of mindfulness as a mode of being,
rather than explicit behavioural tendencies. Miller (2014), Thanda (2011), and Soloway
(2011) all provide more descriptive accounts of teachers who are beginning to develop their
contemplative practices that speak to the development process. They offer specific anecdotal
examples of how mindfulness has affected the teachers and their classrooms as well as how
they practice mindfulness. However, the perspective of experienced teachers who are long-
term practitioners of mindfulness have yet to be explored in as extensive detail and will be
the main objective of this study.
2.3 Conclusion

Most of the research in the field of mindfulness tends to focus on the effectiveness of mindfulness in the classroom. The discussions surrounding how teachers actively utilize mindfulness strategies in their profession tends to be limited to teachers who have gone through a formal training in the university setting. In order to move towards a direction of implementing mindfulness-based interventions on a policy level, it is important to understand how mindfulness can augment an in-service teacher’s professional practice from several different contexts. This qualitative study will complement the findings of more systemic, empirical and standardized research studies and add to the existing qualitative studies by interviewing in-service teachers with a long-term mindfulness practice.
Chapter 3: METHODOLOGY

3.1 Procedure

The objective of this qualitative study is to investigate and understand four different in-service teachers’ personal experiences with mindfulness and how it contributes to their well-being and professional practice. Unlike a quantitative study that might aim to prove or disprove the effectiveness of mindfulness, the purpose of this qualitative inquiry is to form a comprehensive understanding of the contemplative practice of mindfulness from an in-service teacher’s perspective. The study includes a literature review that looked at the existing research on mindfulness in education, namely how it affects students and teachers. The literature review looked more extensively at qualitative studies that focused on how mindfulness training programs have affected both pre-service and in-service teachers. These qualitative studies primarily focused on pre-service and in-service teachers who started the contemplative practice as a part of a course offered at OISE (Miller 2014; Soloway 2011; Thanda 2012).

This study will aim to build on the existing literature by providing a descriptive account of the long-term effects of mindfulness from the perspectives of experienced in-service teachers. It will incorporate the perspective of an in-service teacher with an established practice of mindfulness to learn how mindfulness practice for teachers can evolve over time and capture the classroom narratives and experiences of an experienced, contemplative teacher.


3.2 Instruments of Data Collection:

The primary data collected for the study consisted of four semi-structured interviews that included questions in the following categories.

1. Background of the teacher.
2. Journey to mindfulness – including but not limited to the discovery of mindfulness, and the process of becoming mindful.
3. Mindfulness impacts on teaching practice and the classroom.

The interviews varied from forty to ninety in length and each participant was asked the same set of questions, which are outlined in Appendix B. However, follow-up questions based on a particular participant’s response or experience were also included in the interviews to capture a comprehensive understanding of each participant’s experience with mindfulness in the classroom.

3.3 Participants

3.3.1 About the Participants:

The four teachers interviewed for this study were all teachers based in Ontario. Three participants teach in the Greater Toronto Area and the fourth participant is in Northern Ontario. The following paragraphs provide a more thorough description of each of the participants.

Sally, is a primary junior teacher who has spent ten years in the classroom. She is currently taking a year off to expand her business, which aims to spread mindfulness into education with a priority on teachers, mindfulness and self-care. Sally encountered mindfulness through yoga fourteen years ago, when she was in teacher’s college and started experiencing anxiety. After finding a yoga teacher who she connected with, Sally was
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

inspired to delve deeper into her practice by taking private sessions with this yoga teacher. Through their sessions, she developed a daily practice that consists of several yoga poses and some breathing exercises.

Maria has been teaching for eleven years as a certified high school teacher of Drama and Visual Arts. She also started practicing mindfulness through yoga before thirty years ago, before she became a teacher and has continued to practice mindfulness as a form of self-care. Shortly after she discovered mindfulness, she started sharing the practice with the people around her. Maria practiced mindfulness with her family and incorporated into the school enrichment programs and summer camps she taught in. Maria explains that her arts background helped to naturally implement mindfulness practices into her life as they resemble the focusing exercises she did before a performance to prep herself. Her daily morning practice consists of a half hour to an hour of pranayama breathing in combination with visualization and centering techniques. Pranayama breathing is a form of regulated breathing and can include explicitly breathing in and out through the nostrils and/or controlling the breath. Maria uses visualization and centering techniques to set a positive attitude for her day and tries to visualize how her classes whenever she can.

Lisa is a teacher-librarian who has been teaching for over thirty years, mainly French to grade nine students. She started practicing yoga when she noticed her older siblings having lots of difficulty in their middle ages. In response, Lisa decided to be proactive and incorporate a practice that would help her maintain her well-being. Although a little reluctant before her first class, she grew to love yoga and pursued a yoga teacher-training certification. After receiving her certification, Lisa signed up for a vipassana meditation retreat, which she says was a key component to helping her realize the potential impact that meditation could have on her life.
Jennifer is a junior intermediate educator who is in her twenty second year of teaching and currently teaches a Home School Program (HSP) and grade six homeroom class. Like all three other participants, Jennifer was introduced to mindfulness through her yoga practice seven years ago. Although she did not explicitly mention a daily personal practice, Jennifer has a thirst for learning more about mindfulness through books and listening to audios on her way to and from school. Additionally, since bringing mindfulness into her classroom, she practices yoga and breathing exercises several times a day with her students.

3.3.2 Recruitment:

Mindfulness takes time to develop and foster. The .b Mindfulness In Schools teacher certification program, for example, requires teachers to have developed a daily mindfulness practice 30-45 minutes for at least 6 months. As my goal was to capture the whole experience of mindfulness, a teacher who has just discovered mindfulness might not have had the same opportunity to think about mindfulness and observe its effects as a teacher who has been practicing over the longer period of time. Therefore, all of the teachers in this study have been practicing mindfulness for at least five years and thus had a significant amount of time to develop their mindfulness practice. Three teachers were recruited voluntarily through the Discover Mindfulness network, “a non-profit organization helping to create communities, tools and awareness to bring mindfulness, well-being and mental health to Canadian schools” (Discover Mindfulness, 2015). These participants responded to either a notice in the monthly newspaper or to an announcement made during a public Discover Mindfulness meeting. The fourth participant runs a year long mindfulness workshop for teachers where I was able to ask her to be part of the study.
3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collected for this study comprised of four thirty to ninety minute interviews. These interviews were recorded, with the permission of the participants, for review and transcribing.

The first step of the data analysis comprised of transcribing each interview and in the process, making a preliminary list of themes and categories that might be applicable for coding, the next step of the process. In order to ensure a thorough analysis of the data, the transcriptions went through multiple rounds of coding (Saldana, 2008). In the first round, I organized each interview into different sections, according to the categories of questions aforementioned. I loosely followed a phenomenological coding process, which calls on the researcher to “develop a list of significant statements” that describe how the participants are experiencing a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). In the second round of coding, I read through each section and highlighted any statements that I felt were particularly pertinent to the teachers’ experience of mindfulness along with any statements that presented new information. Additionally, although there were preset codes (the categories of questions) that I used in the first round of coding; the second round consisted of a more in-depth analysis to catch subtle nuances within these broader categories. After coding the first interview, I had a list of sub-codes for the next interview and with each new interview, new codes were added to ensure all data fit into a code. After all the interviews had been coded, I compiled codes from all four interviews together in order to perform a comprehensive analysis of the themes that emerged from the data.

3.4 Ethical Review Procedures

This study followed the Ethical Review Procedures for the Masters of Teaching program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto. Each
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

Participant was given a consent form prior to the interview and read and signed the form (See Appendix A). Participants were fully aware of the purpose of the study and were only interviewed if they volunteered to do so. Before starting the interview, I encouraged participants to ask any questions they may have and were reminded that they could drop out of the study at any time if they wished. Participants were also reminded that they would remain anonymous in this paper and any future publications. Pseudonyms are used to differentiate the different participants and any words that might identify the school or school board in which the participants were excluded. Lastly, the transcriptions were all sent to the participants after the interview for review.

3.5 Limitations

One of the most prominent limitations of the study is the small sample size. As with many qualitative studies, limiting the number of interviews included in the data helps to provide a deeper understanding of a certain phenomenon but limits the generalizability of the findings of the research. Secondly, the only mode of data available for this study were teacher interviews. Inclusion of in-class observations, interviews with the students of teachers who practice mindfulness and excerpts from teacher journals would all have complemented and provided a more robust understanding of mindfulness experiences in the classroom. Lastly, the participants recruited for this study were recruited on a voluntary basis. It is possible that teachers who had attempted to start a mindfulness practice and perhaps had a negative experience may not have been as keen to participate in the study.
Chapter 4 – Findings

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I will present the findings of the mindfulness experience based on an analysis of the interviews of four in-service teachers in Ontario. The data was organized into themes and subthemes that were organized by codes that emerged from several readings of the data. The themes that guide this chapter cover “what” and “how” teachers experienced mindfulness and are: (1) teachers’ definition of mindfulness; (2) the positive impacts of mindfulness on teachers’ personal and professional practice; (3) how mindfulness has impacted pedagogy and philosophy (4) challenges of mindfulness; and (5) mindfulness impacts on the classroom. A significant portion of the findings section is dedicated to the impacts teachers reported to their professional practice as it addresses the main question of this study.

4.2 Teachers’ definitions of mindfulness

There were two main definitions that teachers referred to when they provided their own understanding of mindfulness. The two definitions are covered in the following sections.

4.2.1 Being Fully Present, without judgment.

Sally interpreted mindfulness as being fully present. This means developing an awareness of whatever is going on whether you are experiencing happiness or sadness or anything in between, that you are able to acknowledge the emotion and recognize that it will eventually pass.

For Maria, being present or bringing presence to whatever you’re doing was a quintessential component of mindfulness. For her, it was not the “what” that defined
mindfulness but the “how” of doing something. She said being present means being aware of “your sensory experience, your thoughts, your feelings, your sensations.”

Lisa defined mindfulness as “stopping the story.” This term is often used in mindfulness to refer to the ability to notice these things without judging or analyzing any of the things that are going on. Lisa emphasized that, as teachers, we often create stories about or judge students. For example, when a teacher sees a student who might often misbehave, they might think “oh that kid always does … blahidahdidha.” However, mindfulness in this scenario would mean letting the thought of the student pass and returning to a neutral, non-judgmental view of the student.

4.2.2 Non-Reactivity

The second component that participants continuously alluded to was the ability to respond to a problem or event rather than react. Sally defined non-reactivity as the ability to “create space” between the stimulus (e.g. a disruptive student or reporting period time) and your response. For her, this was the key to having more positive interactions with students. Both Sally and Maria clearly emphasized that mindful teachers are not reactive to the events that go on in their classroom or in their school. Jennifer also referred to non-reactivity when describing her mindfulness practice. She described mindfulness as a practice “to bring yourself to a certain place of not losing it over something that has triggered you in some way but you have control over it so you’re accessing a different part of your brain.”

4.3 Positive Impacts of Mindfulness

Overall, all four teachers reported having an extremely positive experience of their mindfulness practice thus far. It was evident from the interviews that mindfulness played a critical role in maintaining Maria’s well-being.
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

“I mean it’s kind of like a drug. It’s something that you know, it’s like a lifeline...you know my teacher, my yoga teacher talks about demoting and promoting habits. It’s a promoting habit you know? Mindfulness, it’s just beneficial. It’s life-supporting, it’s life-sustaining. So I see the benefits. I see how it’s helped me in my life.”

She added that implementing a daily practice has increased her energy levels. Sally and Lisa both felt that it has made them more calm and patient. Jennifer commented that although she identifies herself as “fiery”, she has been able to take control over her impulses through a mindfulness practice.

The following section will outline the common key positive changes the participants experienced from incorporating mindfulness into their professional practice. These are: stress and anxiety management; improved relationships with colleagues and parents; an ability to handle student behavior in a positive way; and a high level of self-awareness.

4.3.1 Stress and anxiety management

All teachers mentioned that mindfulness allowed them to develop their ability to cope with the stressors of everyday teaching. Sally explained that through her mindfulness practice, she was able to cultivate patience, improving her ability to manage the “tricky parents”, “relationships between staff” and “the difficult kid.”

All four teachers acknowledged both the stressful nature of the job and identified specific instances of their school day that were anxiety-inducing. They all also specified how they used their mindfulness practice to help manage that stress. Lisa mentioned that her mindfulness practice reduced her anxiety about all her tasks. As a result, she was more productive and focused on the task at hand and so “stuff just does get done.” Jennifer mentioned that she tries to take a different perspective on whatever is causing her stress by drawing attention to her breath. For example, when faced with a challenging class, she had first thought she might want to retire. However, she said she redirected herself and chose to
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

focus on the potential for growth rather than focusing solely on the difficulties. Additionally, when Jennifer feels she is stressed for time, returning to her breath helps her realize that she could just as easily think, “well not enough time is equally as valid as I have plenty of time.”

4.3.2 Improved relationship management skills

All four teachers described that they felt mindfulness had better equipped them with interpersonal skills that helped them manage the many relationships in their lives. Sally and Jennifer both reported developing compassion for parents, which prevented the two teachers from forming judgmental attitudes towards difficult parents. Jennifer describes the impacts of a judgmental attitude from a teacher on a parent.

“I remember feeling like, oh you knew that parents were just creating these entitled kids and so you know, Johnny shows up at school with this attitude of, like the world has to serve me. And you know, it’s sometimes really difficult when you’re speaking with that parent and you just see so clearly where it’s coming from and you know, they pick up on your vibe.”

Jennifer explained that she felt her relationships with parents had improved as she continued to deepen her mindfulness practice because parents recognized the compassion she had for their children. Through their practice of non-reactivity, both Sally and Jennifer commented that they were able to listen to a parent’s comments and not take them personally.

This ability to distance ones’ emotional reactions to comments, conflicts and people was another running theme with all four participants. Sally specifically referred to letting go of the need to please everyone. Lisa turns to her breathing meditation to remain calm and stay focused on resolving conflicts without letting her emotions or the emotions of the other person take over. Jennifer described how mindfulness allowed her to assist her colleagues with their stress and anxiety in a way that allowed her to have compassion without adding
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

stress to her own plate. She explains, “I could sit and listen to somebody compassionately and maybe help guide them to a way that they might find a solution but I don’t take it on.”

4.3.3 Handling Challenging Student Behaviours

All teachers demonstrated a deep understanding for the emotional needs of students in their classes that they accredited to their mindfulness practice. All participants used compassion to handle the students who they found the most challenging to work with in their class.

Both Sally and Lisa had a specific contemplative practice for students who they were having trouble connecting to and often misbehaved during class time. Sally would use visualizations to imagine a positive interaction between her and the student who seemed to be having trouble in her class. Lisa dealt with particularly difficult classes through a loving-kindness meditation, which involved her wishing every single student to be well, to be happy and peaceful. She said this practice really helped her be genuinely glad to see those same students every day, regardless what their behavior had been like the previous day. Through mindfulness, she was able to “distinguish the behavior from the person.”

To describe how mindfulness has impacted her ability to let go of misbehavior, Maria discussed a specific interaction between a student, whom she had asked to leave the class after he displayed some disruptive behavior.

“So I just asked him to leave, I was firm and direct, my voice raised a bit but I didn’t hang onto it emotionally….Some things really eat at me, a lot. I still struggle with that personally but I think that I’m better at not letting things eat at me because of mindfulness.”

Lisa had a running theme throughout her interview which was that of “dropping the story line,” and this mantra was applicable to how she views student behaviour. She implied that we should be cognizant that we are dealing with the student in that moment without placing a judgment on the student that may affect your perception of the student even when
they are behaving well. Our natural reaction may be to hold a grudge but practicing mindfulness will help us focus, as Lisa mentioned, on the student who shows up “that day:”

“Well if you’re talking about the kids, you tend to tell stories about kids acting a certain way and really we don’t have a clue why they’re acting a certain way. I can’t tell you how many times I’ve thought: “oh god this kid’s so annoying,” and then you find out something hideous, you know, about their life and you know, finally get to the point where you don’t assume. Don’t assume you know what’s going on. Just deal with whoever shows up today. You know, the focused student or the angry student or the tired student. Focus on what you’ve got that day.”

Although she did not mention it explicitly, throughout our interview, Jennifer mentioned how she dealt with students who might speak out to get attention and how she would get the student to redirect themselves. It was clear that for Jennifer, having her own mindfulness practice and sharing it with her students, gave her the tools and language to have students to take responsibility for their actions. For example, she referred to an instance where a student acted out when he was not able to go get a drink of water right away. She took this moment to have a class discussion on how to take care of your own needs and suggested that the student bring a water bottle to class. Then she guided her students in creating a statement (“I am prepared with everything that I need to take care of myself.”) to repeat during their breathing exercise, acting as a kind of mantra.

4.3.4 Self-Awareness

As mentioned above, all four teachers had a positive view of the impact that mindfulness has had on their lives. What was interesting was that all four teachers also had a high level of self-awareness, a term defined by Jennings and Greenberg (2009) as the ability to “recognize their emotions, emotional patterns and tendencies and know how to generate emotions such as joy and enthusiasm to motivate learning in themselves and others.” The participants often mentioned colleagues who were incredibly fatigued and stressed and were on the verge of burn-out. Jennifer alluded that a culture of exhaustion and fatigue was in fact
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

the norm in the teaching profession. When asked to explain how she thinks mindfulness has helped her develop strategies to deal with the stress of the job, she described some of the stressors and how a teacher might “typically” react:

“Like we would just go through the daily grind of good days and bad days and, you know, complain about kids, and you know, they don’t finish homework, they don’t care and they’re unmotivated and all they want to do is, you know, go talk about the boy-girl issues that you know, start happening halfway through grade 6…And that’s what would preoccupy your day. And how much marking is on your desk and like, that’s just not where my mind’s at. That’s what it would be. I mean that’s what’s typical.”

Lisa and Jennifer both thought by actively practicing mindfulness, their days were generally more enjoyable, regardless of external factors. Jennifer mentioned the control she felt over being able to be happy no matter how her day was:

“I’ve just seen how it’s just made my life so much happier. And the happiness just comes from within. It’s not circumstantial. Like I could have a crappy day but I could still go home happy.”

Lisa mentioned that because she was able to cultivate genuine compassion for her students, she truly looked forward to seeing her students each day. Through the loving-kindness meditation mentioned in the previous section, Lisa was able to avoid ruminating on negative thoughts about her students and this practice made her job much more enjoyable. Lisa explained that the ability to cultivate joy for her job is related to a teacher’s well-being:

“You’ve got to figure out a way to enjoy what you’re doing! And I mean that’s your job but that’s also going to help you with your life.”

Sally handled the students, who were often disruptive, by recognizing the role that she played as a teacher and how she reacted to the misbehaviour. By noticing how she reacted to the students who challenged her, she discovered the behaviours that would “trigger” her. Sally was able to apply this knowledge about herself to manage her emotions before dealing with disruptive behaviours. This allowed her to approach these situations in a calm and
productive manner, rather than from a reactive place by telling herself, “okay, maybe I know dealing with him is tricky, so I need to walk away for a moment and then come back and be a little more clear.”

She explained that meditation helped create more space between her emotional reaction, triggered by certain behaviours, and her response to those behaviours. Creating this space allowed her to interact with students in a positive way. Because she was aware of the behaviours that triggered her, she was able to think about her response beforehand, helping her cope with her students in a more productive way.

4.4 Implications for the Classroom and students

During all four interviews, teachers often commented on how mindfulness had affected or could affect the classroom environment and the students. Sally constantly emphasized that teachers who are grounded and calm create a “safe space” for their students. The sense of calm that a teacher fosters through their mindfulness practice filters through to the students. Lisa agreed and felt that students feel at ease in her classroom, and feeling more relaxed helps students take risks. She said that infusing a sense of calm is especially important in a language classroom as students would be “more willing to try and experiment with the language.”

Maria and Jennifer said that mindfulness helped to create a caring and tolerant classroom. Maria often used different visualization techniques in mindfulness to help students deal with their day-to-day concerns and oppressive situations at school. She felt that by working as a group to improve overall well-being and wellness creates feelings of belonging and connection between the students in the classroom:

“just overall feelings of belonging, feelings of connection, feelings of uh… just overall wellness, as a person. And just creating a healthier, more tolerant space and environment that when students practice kind of being and breathing and being
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

present together it kind of changes the chemistry of what goes on in the classroom. So it might, you know, I believe it could create more tolerance, then you have less of the issues. Like the oppressive issues that happen in schools.”

Jennifer explained that in her classroom, she and her students are not afraid to show affection. “[W]e squeeze each other and you know, rub your shoulders and we do that here and we’re not afraid to do that.”

Additionally, both Sally and Lisa commented on the increased need to help students manage their emotions and anxiety. As the TDSB reported in 2011, there was an increase in the number of students who are dealing with mental health issues. Lisa described the rise of anxiety as “an epidemic” and both Sally and Jennifer strongly expressed their belief in the potential for mindfulness to help students feel more “safe and secure.”

4.5 Mindfulness Influences on Pedagogy and Philosophy

After the first interview, it was clear that mindfulness could permeate into a teacher’s pedagogy and philosophy of teaching. Researchers on effective teaching practices emphasize the importance of being able to adjust and adapt lessons to students’ needs, often in the moment (Block et al., 2012). Sally, Maria and Jennifer all commented that practicing being present in the classroom helped them be more attuned to their students, and allowed them to be flexible to their needs.

In addition to being present, Sally specified that she felt her practice of cultivating compassion helped students sense that she was reasonable and flexible enough to make accommodations they needed for their schoolwork. During the first interview, when asked to discuss the characteristics of a teacher who practices mindfulness, Sally repeated throughout the interview that a teacher who practice mindfulness is “grounded” which allows students to feel safe and secure. It was clear from our interview that Sally felt a strong sense of responsibility to provide a safe and caring environment for her students. Moreover,
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

fostering students’ ability to care for other people was a fundamental component of her teaching philosophy. She also expressed that she felt cultivating a mindfulness practice could greatly facilitate her ability to create this kind of learning environment.

Maria feels her morning practice where she takes the time to clear her mind, is essential to helping her be present in the classroom. This presence allows her to be more spontaneous as a teacher, adjusting her lessons according to “what’s going on with [her] students emotionally or energetically.” Maria added that being present in a classroom, helps her provide students with clear instructions and recognizing that as a teacher, you have the power to direct the energy of the classroom by being more attuned to the students and how they are feeling.

For Jennifer, flexibility was a matter of being able to incorporate mindfulness into the classroom at any point in the day, as it seemed necessary rather than dedicating a specific part of the day to it. She explained that because she has her own practice, she is able to recognize opportunities to integrate mindfulness into the curriculum more easily as well as sense when her students may need to take a moment to focus on their breath.

All four participants talked about the importance of following the curriculum expectations as a guideline and discussed how a mindfulness practice had impacted their perspective of the curriculum. Sally explained that as she developed her practice she developed an understanding that education is a “human experience.” For her, that meant straying away from the “rote” work such as “filling in blanks” on a worksheet. Instead she engaged her students in big, cumulative, projects that incorporated “communication skills and cooperation skills”, or “learning about the world.” Mindfulness was central to both Sally and Jennifer’s teaching philosophies as a strategy to develop their students into the kind of compassionate, creative and peaceful people they wanted to see in society at large. Sally
strongly believed that a mindfulness practice would provide her students with the tools they needed to manage the “increased amount of life” they would encounter. Jennifer believed that by helping her students to live out of a mindful “place” she was making the world more peaceful place.

Sally also added that as she delved deeper into her mindfulness practice, she felt she became more creative and with the projects she did with her students. Like Sally, Maria also felt that mindfulness impacted the kinds of activities she would have her students do. She explained that as an arts teacher, and in drama especially, it was quite easy to incorporate mindfulness into her lessons. She said that she would have students engage in self-inquiry and approach visual arts projects with a sensory awareness and spontaneity.

Maria also described several workshops she did with students to help deal with the stress in their lives. She referred back to several visualization techniques. Maria believed that giving students agency to take control of their feelings was liberating for students who feel powerless in many areas of their life. She explained that workshops like these could mitigate the disruptive behaviour in the classroom as a lot of misbehavior originates from students seeking to gain power and control.

For Lisa, the content of her French class became less and less important over the years as her mindfulness practice has developed. Like Sally, she saw the curriculum as a “vehicle” to equip her students with a “toolkit,” part of which is social emotional well-being. She also challenged her students to reflect on the “default” stories they might tell themselves in any particular situation. She used a conversation she would have with students after handing back a test as an example:

“I sort of just say: “now what’s your first thought when you get back a test and you look at the mark?” Is it, “Oh I did badly. That’s because she didn’t give me the sheets. And she didn’t review this and da-da-da-“ Or is it, “my stupid brother took my stuff and I couldn’t get it.” What’s the first thing that enters
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

your head? And maybe next time, you know, you can just take a breath, we’ve got the breath words up in the classroom, take a breath and… and just think: “what can I do next time?” Instead of creating a whole story about why you didn’t do well on this one. Or why you did do well. “I’m so smart. I’m the smart one in the family!” That’s a story too. Just take a breath. Can I do differently next time. If I got 100, maybe I could help someone out—you know someone who’s not doing that well—the next time. So they’ll just start to think about where they always go. What’s their default?”

Jennifer constantly and consciously weaves mindfulness into her classroom on a daily basis. She strongly believes in fostering confidence in her students using the tools that mindfulness has to offer them. All throughout her interview, she talked about different contexts and anecdotal stories of how she showed her students the agency they had over their choices at school, over their emotions and their futures. She teaches her students to notice their natural reactions to different situations and suggests responding in another way.

Over time, she said her students start to “get it”. In preparation for the EQAO tests, the class read a text on a boy named Micah who spent his summer at his aunt’s fishing lodge where he had to start each morning with a bunch of chores. When she asked her students what the big idea of the story was, they responded:

“Well you get to choose how you look at things. A positive attitude will make your day go better…. Like Micah could have been miserable but instead he chose to be happy and seeing the things, he focused on, the things that made him happy rather than focusing on the chores.”

She said they were able to recognize that Micah had the power to determine how his day went by choosing a positive perspective. This was an indicator that they were really starting to grasp the power they had on regulating their emotions in whatever situation.

4.6 Challenges to Mindfulness

The challenges to implementing a personal mindfulness practice are not often discussed in the literature but are equally as important for teachers to understand before starting a mindfulness practice. Although every participant had a long history of practicing
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

mindfulness, each participant mentioned at least one example of an obstacle they had encountered during in cultivating mindfulness practice.

4.6.1 Not Having Enough Time

All the teachers noted that in addition to having an open-mind, a teacher needs to be committed to developing their practice as it takes time, which is not something teachers find they have a lot of. Sally works with teachers to develop their own practices and also to introduce mindfulness to their students. She commented on how many teachers do find it difficult to practice every day. Maria also mentioned that the teachers she had worked with found it difficult to fit mindfulness into their busy schedule. Lisa and Jennifer also added that they found it difficult to find enough time in the day for a personal meditation practice.

However, Sally pointed out that part of her mindfulness practice has been to develop self-compassion and flexibility in how she incorporates mindfulness:

“Like if I miss a day of practice on my mat, you know I still know that walking to the subway could be like a practice. Like there’s other ways to get it in whereas before, because I would feel like a failure if I didn’t get my mat out every morning. So I’m way more laid back about it now.”

4.6.2 It’s a “gradual” process

All participants at some point either implicitly or explicitly mentioned that developing a mindfulness practice and reaping its benefits can be a lengthy process. Sally consistently used language throughout the interview such as “It just takes time,” or “I think it’s been so gradual for me but…” and this took me a long time to realize,” that hinted to the slow process of realizing the impacts of mindfulness on her personal and professional life. Lisa added that a teacher needs to have a certain level of self-awareness to recognize the changes in their professional practice. For Maria, she recognized some immediate merits of her mindfulness practice but stressed that over time, as her mindfulness practice has developed so have the benefits that she has gained.
4.6.3 It’s not all rainbows and sunshine

Sally, Maria and Lisa all emphasized that newcomers often have misconstrued notions of what mindfulness is that complicate the cultivation of their practice. Sally explained that often people think that meditation will bring about a more positive life with “sunshine and rainbows” but in reality “the bad stuff and the sad stuff’s still going to happen,” and mindfulness is really about being able to accept the whole range of emotions that may arise in our lives and this can be a difficult task:

“Like we tend to suppress a lot of things that happen in our lives. And they don’t have to be major traumas, just the day to day emotions of being human. So I think what scares a lot of people off is that, that stuff has to come up. When you start calming down your mind, the stuff that’s been suppressed has to come up.”

Both Maria and Lisa mentioned that many people who start to practice mindfulness think that they should stop thinking altogether, and because they are not able to, they tend to give up on the practice altogether. Additionally, Maria believed many people are put off of mindfulness because they mistakenly think mindfulness is restricted to sitting and breathing on a pillow and was solely a religious practice. However, Maria stressed that mindfulness is about “how” one does things rather than “what”. She expressed that mindfulness can be practiced while doing the dishes or making the bed and can be practiced secularly.

4.6.4 Going against the norm

When speaking about practicing mindfulness either personally or with students and in the classroom, all four teachers consistently used language that suggested a perceived tension between practicing mindfulness and going against North American cultural norms. Sally said that when she practices with her students, they “know [mindfulness is] something different. They get that it’s the opposite of how life is for us right now in Toronto and in North America in general.”
All four participants commented on their fear of being judged by their peers and reactions from parents and students. Sally said she does not share her practice of using positive visualizations to deal with a challenging student because “it sounds a little wacky.”

Maria believed that a teacher needed courage to bring mindfulness into the classroom because it does not adhere to social norms. She discussed how it has become easier over the years with more and more research and media attention that have highlighted the many benefits of mindfulness. However, she said that in the past she was always afraid of being judged, despite the fact that she always found students were receptive to the practice when she introduced it in a classroom setting.

Lisa alluded to having preconceived notions of mindfulness being an “airy, fairy” practice before she started practicing yoga. Even Jennifer, who had self-identified as a confident teacher who was willing to do anything, was aware of the possible reactions of other colleagues to her practicing mindfulness in the classroom.

### 4.7 The need to share mindfulness with others

Despite a fear of being judged, all four participants felt a strong need to share the practice with fellow teachers and students. Sally strongly believes the lessons she has acquired from her yoga practice are relevant to being an effective teacher and that “we’re really missing the boat, not making mindfulness a huge part of teaching.” As mentioned in a previous chapter, she works with educators to help develop their practice and to bring mindfulness into their classrooms.

Maria is actively pursuing a Masters degree at OISE with the intention of bringing mindfulness into teacher education. She is working on creating a teacher’s resource that combines the visual arts, drama, music and dance with mindfulness techniques. She has also facilitated mindfulness workshops for pre-service teachers for the last eight years.
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

Throughout the interview Lisa mentioned the activities she had led at her school related to mindfulness such as a lunchtime yoga session for her students and she was just starting to get a teacher group together to practice mindfulness together.

All participants agreed that bringing mindfulness into teacher education would be beneficial for teachers. However, Sally Lisa and Jennifer all cautioned that mindfulness should be introduced carefully and was hesitant to a prescriptive approach to mindfulness. Lisa commented, “you don’t want to sort of force this down someone’s throat.” She added that she hoped the mindfulness movement in education would be a sustainable one and not just simply the next “buzz word.”

For Jennifer her first instinct when she discovered mindfulness, was to incorporate it into her classroom and share the benefits with her students. She commented on how mindfulness altered her philosophy of education: “Well okay, how do I bring this to my kids because the more people that operate out of this, out of this place, the better a planet we have.”

In fact, all teachers described the need to introduce the practice to students at some point, referring to the Ministry’s mandate to promote students health and well-being as well as the hike in the number of students dealing with anxiety and other mental health issues. Sally proposed that the first step to reducing the anxiety epidemic is for more adults practiced mindfulness and become “really conscious and grounded.”

4.8 Summary of Findings

This section discloses the results from an analysis from the four interviews with teachers who had a personal practice of mindfulness. The section began by explaining that teachers defined mindfulness as having a sense of presence and awareness of the present
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

moment as well as the ability to respond rationally to daily stressors rather than react from an emotional state.

All participants found their mindfulness practice to have had a number of positive impacts on their professional life including their ability to deal with stress, manage relationships with parents and colleagues, and effectively handle difficult student behaviour. They all realized the agency over how they felt about teaching and their students and used this to positively affect their classroom environment by cultivating patience and compassion.

It was clear that mindfulness also impacted the participants’ teaching practice. By being more present in the classroom, teachers felt they were more attuned to how students were feeling and could be flexible enough to change the lessons to best suit the students’ needs. All participants emphasized the importance of going beyond the curriculum and thinking about the lessons they wanted to teach to create the kind of citizens that society would benefit from.

Although they listed many benefits they experienced from mindfulness, participants also discussed some possible challenges to developing a mindfulness practice. These included a lack of time for mindfulness in the day combined with the amount of time it took to realize the benefits of mindfulness; the misconceptions that mindfulness is about not thinking and bringing about solely positive emotions; and lastly, the fear of being judged by sharing their practice with others.

Despite the challenges they expressed, all participants were actively involved and passionate about sharing their mindfulness practice with others, especially other teachers. However, they were cautious and all felt it was not a practice that can only be introduced to those who are willing and cannot be imposed.
The following section will conclude the study by discussing implications and recommendations for future studies in mindfulness whilst considering the findings presented in this section.
Chapter 5: Discussion

The main objective of this qualitative study was to gain insight into how mindfulness practice has and can impact teachers’ personal and professional life in the long-term. Earlier qualitative studies on mindfulness training for teachers were mostly quantitative and the limited qualitative studies focused on teachers who had received mindfulness training as a requirement for a course in their teacher education program or a holistic education graduate course at the University of Toronto (Soloway et al., 2008; Thanda, 2011; Miller 2014). This chapter will compare the findings from the studies mentioned in the literature review to the findings found in this study, discuss the implications for teacher education, professional development for in-service teachers and end off by making recommendations for future studies.

5.1 Comparison to existing literature

The results of this study, along with several previous studies, indicate that developing a mindfulness practice has the potential to make a positive impact for any individual. This study focused specifically on the impacts that experienced in-service teachers have observed after developing their practice over several years. Unlike the participants in the studies mentioned in the literature review, all participants in this study discovered mindfulness on their own terms. They were not required to practice mindfulness as part of a course or a professional training. The main findings from this study which supported the existing research are the following: (1) teachers are able to relay mindfulness practices to their students; (2) teachers develop strategies to manage their stress, allowing them to prevent burnout; (3) teachers and teacher candidates may become more open to learning new pedagogical strategies through mindfulness; (4) and lastly, mindfulness develops a teacher’s
presence in the classroom. The following sections will use these themes as a guideline to compare the findings in the research to the findings in this study.

5.1.1. Sharing the practice with students

An analysis of the existing research found that there are many advantages for students when they practice mindfulness, supporting a movement to bring mindfulness into every classroom. However, researchers insist on the importance of teachers developing their own mindfulness practice before sharing the practice with students (Albrecht et al., 2012; Miller 2014).

The participants in this study all had their own practice and through an analysis of their interviews, this study found two possible rationales for teachers developing their own mindfulness practice before integrating it into their classroom. Firstly, all teachers had actively incorporated mindfulness into their classrooms, sometimes before mindfulness had become a well-known concept. Additionally, participants expressed their passion and commitment to introducing mindfulness to others. One possible reason for their level of dedication is that they had directly experienced the benefits of mindfulness from their own practice. Therefore, teachers with a personal practice may be more committed to introducing mindfulness to their students than teachers who do not have a personal practice.

Secondly, all participants in this study found their own unique way of weaving mindfulness into curriculum content or daily classroom routines to help students develop self-regulation skills. Maria had students identify the source of their stress and visualize the stressors disappearing and Lisa had students notice their thought patterns and challenged them to try another thought pattern. Jennifer used the language she learned from her own practice in mindfulness to empower students to manage conflicts in her classroom. Thus, having a personal contemplative practice may help a teacher integrate mindfulness into their
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

classroom more naturally. Jennifer explicitly expressed how her own practice is necessary to help her infuse mindfulness into her lesson when she feels the students could benefit from it:

You have to have, some background. You have to have spent time practicing this because then it doesn’t come to you like as you think on your feet. You know how you become an experienced teacher and you can pull a last minute lesson out of your hat, you know, if you had to. I do that all the time if I just go with, I have a plan and then things seem to be going this way and you just go with it.

However, since this study did not compare teachers without a mindfulness practice to those who do not, no firm conclusions can be made.

5.1.2 Stress Management and social competence

Previously, qualitative studies on teachers and mindfulness, examined in-service and pre-service teachers who had been introduced to mindfulness in a course or in a program. These studies found that teachers with a mindfulness practice were better able to manage stress, a skill which Harris (2011) argues is essential to developing effective teachers. Harris explains that it is important for teachers to identify, understand, prevent and address their stress on a day-to-day basis. Lending support to Harris’s argument, the participants in this study were aware of and clearly articulated the factors attributing to their stress. Sally said that mindfulness helped her notice the behaviours and personalities that “triggered” her. Maria mentioned students’ disruptive behaviour can “eat away at her.” Lisa mentioned that waiting can often could be a stressor and Jennifer identified that time constraints, not having enough time to get everything done could cause stress.

The participants also had developed specific strategies to both prevent and address their stress. Maria uses her daily morning practice to work through anything she might have going on in her personal life so that she could be fully present in class with her students. Sally and Lisa both practiced cultivating compassion for the students who tended to be
disruptive in their classes. Jennifer redirects herself, intentionally choosing to view her stress from an alternative perspective. Maria, Lisa and Jennifer all commented on how the mindfulness strategies they employed, helped them to cultivate joy for their job on a daily basis, regardless of external circumstances. Therefore, like the participants in Thanda’s study, the four teachers had developed several internal resources to manage their stress.

Along with stress management, Jennings and Greenberg (2009) added that social-emotional competence is critical to developing effective teachers who do not burn out. They call teachers with high social-emotional competence, prosocial teachers. Two characteristics of prosocial teachers are that they are self-aware and can manage their emotions and relationships. Sally, Maria, Lisa and Jennifer all displayed a heightened awareness for their own emotions as well as for others, which helped them cultivate compassion for others. This skill not only helped them handle difficult students but also improved their relationships with parents and colleagues.

5.1.3 An alternative pedagogy

Shapiro et al., (2006) explain that when an individual is able to activate all three axioms of mindfulness, they are able to reap the benefits of reperceiving. One of these benefits is “value clarification” where the individual is able to formulate their own values rather than adopt the values imposed by society. The findings in this study suggest that through the practice of mindfulness, teachers might go through a “clarification” process for their vision of teaching as all four participants commented on how mindfulness had impacted and influenced both their philosophy of education as well as their pedagogical practices. Participants saw how to weave mindfulness into their lessons. Sally mentioned how she felt the projects she assigned became more creative. Lisa explained mindfulness
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER’S EXPERIENCE

changed how she viewed the curriculum. Instead of an end in itself, the curriculum became a vehicle to teach her students important life skills, such as social and emotional competence.

5.1.4 Teacher Presence

In, *The Contemplative Practitioner*, Miller (2014) emphasizes the importance of teacher presence to a classroom environment. The author references an example of a teacher who was able to use presence, and give full attention to a student who was often disruptive to ensure he got the attention she felt he was seeking by acting out. This kind of presence, she felt, ultimately improved his behaviour (P.12). Although they did not specifically mention their presence in this context, Sally, Maria and Lisa all felt that their mindfulness practice had an impact on the overall classroom environment. Sally believes that students start to feel safe and secure in the classroom when they have a teacher who is grounded and has a calm disposition, which can be cultivated through mindfulness. Maria mentioned that mindfulness made her classroom a more inclusive environment, while Lisa pointed out a story of a former student who had commented on how “nice” it was to be in her French class every day. All teachers also mentioned how “being present” in the class helped them be flexible in their lesson delivery, adjusting to the students’ needs as they were more attuned to the energy in the classroom.

5.2 Implications for integrating mindfulness into teacher education and professional development

It is evident from both the research and the findings in the study that mindfulness has the potential to bring about substantial changes to better the educational community. Nevertheless, in order for mindfulness programs to be successfully implemented at the policy level, future studies must hone in on the process of developing mindfulness.
Thanda (2011) highlighted that all four participants who had taken the MBWE course all had “recognized stress as an issue and described a readiness and openness to learn more about stress so that they could manage it.” Additionally all participants cautioned forcing mindfulness on people. Sally and Lisa both emphasized the fact that individuals need to be open to the practice in order to embody it. Therefore, it would be important for any policy makers or teacher education programs to consider how open an individual is to the practice of mindfulness and stray away from enforcing the practice on a teacher.

Secondly, participants mentioned that it took time to develop a mindfulness practice. Most of the programs mentioned in the literature review required students to practice every day for a minimum of four weeks. One teacher from Thanda (2012)’s study mentioned that it took her two years to fully integrate mindfulness into her teaching practice. Furthermore, Maria, and Lisa both mentioned that as they continued to develop her practice, they discovered more benefits from mindfulness. Therefore, if mindfulness is offered in teacher education programs or for professional development for in-service teachers, it is important that it follows a format that allows adequate time for cultivating their practice.

Third, although not mentioned in the literature review, the participants explained that they felt their colleagues often had false views of mindfulness. Some people have the view that mindfulness was eliminating all negative emotions and eliminating thinking altogether. Additionally, teachers mentioned fear of being judged by others especially as they were initially beginning to introduce mindfulness into their classrooms. Therefore it may be beneficial for any professional development sessions on mindfulness to address these misconceptions so that teachers have an accurate understanding of mindfulness. Moreover, participants were fearful of being judged when sharing their practice with their students or talking about it with their colleagues. Therefore, efforts should be made to spread awareness
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

about mindfulness in the teaching community and create an environment where mindfulness is encouraged and supported.

5.3 Limitations and Areas for further research

The scope of this study was limited to the perspectives of four female teachers in Ontario, meaning the results of this study may not be generalizable to a portion of the teaching population. However, the aim of this research was to gain a rich in-depth perspective of a teacher’s mindfulness experience rather than to obtain generalizable results. The mode of data was also limited to just face-to-face interviews and could have been complemented by journals and in-class observations, which could have added to the richness of the description of the teachers’ experiences.

Although this study added to the existing literature on what kinds of effects a teacher may observe by developing a mindfulness practice, it lacked the perspective of other stakeholders such as students and parents. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the role that mindfulness may play in developing more effective teachers, it would be interesting to see student perceptions of their classroom environments with teachers who practice mindfulness in comparison to teachers who do not. At the elementary level, this kind of study would have to be long-term as it would require the researcher to follow a cohort of students through a minimum of two years. However, this kind of study may be more easily implemented at the high school level where students have multiple teachers at the same time. Additionally, it would be interesting to include parent interviews to investigate how they perceive teachers who practice mindfulness and if they notice any impacts on their child and their success in the classroom.
5.4 Conclusion

The main objective of this qualitative study was to develop a descriptive account of in-service teachers’ experiences with mindfulness. The participants, who are long-term practitioners of mindfulness, described specific examples such as fostering mindfulness for a challenging student and developing a vision for teaching that helped them navigate the curriculum. Reinforcing the findings from existing qualitative research, all participants in this study described the positive impact mindfulness has had on their personal and professional lives. The study also unveiled some of the challenges teachers face when cultivating their practice, which the existing literature did not explicitly discuss. These findings could direct the implementation of mindfulness into teacher education program and creation of professional development workshops for in-service teachers. As mindfulness becomes an increasingly more popular practice in the classroom, it is important to maintain a thorough understanding of mindfulness so that teachers can continue to be introduced to mindfulness and reap the benefits of the practice.
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS

REFERENCES


Date: Oct 3rd, 2014

Dear __________,

My name is Sue Kwon and I am a graduate student at OISE, University of Toronto, and am currently enrolled as a Master of Teaching candidate. I am studying the benefits of mindfulness for a teacher’s professional practices for the purposes of a major assignment for our program. I think that your personal experience with mindfulness will provide insights into this topic.

I am writing a report on this study as a requirement of the Master of Teaching Program. My course instructor who is providing support for the process this year is Dr. Arlo Kempf. My research supervisor is Jack Miller. The purpose of this requirement is to allow us to become familiar with a variety of ways to do research. My data collection consists of a 40 to 60 minute interview that will be recorded on a phone device. I would be grateful if you would allow me to interview you at a place and time convenient to you. I can conduct the interview at your workplace, in a public place, or anywhere else that you might prefer.

The contents of this interview will be used for my assignment, which will include a final paper, as well as informal presentations to my classmates and/or potentially at a conference or publication. I will not use your name or anything else that might identify you, your school or school board in my written work, oral presentations, or publications. This information remains confidential. The only people who will have access to my data will be my research supervisor and my course instructor. You are free to change your mind at any time, and to withdraw even after you have consented to participate. You may decline to answer any specific questions. I will destroy the tape recording after the paper has been presented and/or published which may take up to five years after the data have been collected. There are no known risks or benefits to you for assisting in the project, and I will give you the opportunity to review the interview transcripts to ensure accuracy.

Please sign the attached form, if you agree to be interviewed. The second copy is for your records. Thank you very much for your help.

Yours sincerely,

Sue Kwon
EXPLORING MINDFULNESS: A FULL TEACHER'S EXPERIENCE

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Research Supervisor’s Name: Dr. Jack Miller
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Consent Form

I acknowledge that the topic of this interview has been explained to me and that any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I understand that I can withdraw at any time without penalty.

I have read the letter provided to me by Sue Kwon and agree to participate in an interview for the purposes described.
Signature: _________________________________

Name (printed): _______________________________

Date: ________________________________
Appendix B: Interview Questions

Thank you for agreeing to speak with me. I appreciate your time. This interview will take about forty minutes, but you may ask to stop the interview at any point. The purpose of this conversation is to talk about your perspectives and experiences with the practice of mindfulness. This interview is part of an educational study that is required as part of the Masters of Teaching program at the OISE, University of Toronto. I'd like to ask you a few questions about your experiences here. Is that okay?

I'd like to ask for your permission to record our conversation. This will help me to give you my full attention now and return to our conversation later. The interview is confidential, and only my research supervisor and I will have access to this recording, which I will transcribe. If you want me to stop at any time, just let me know. Is this okay with you?

Do you have any questions before we get started?

**Background information:**

1. What is your name and what is your role at the school?
2. How long have you been teaching for?

**Journey to Mindfulness**

1. When were you first introduced to mindfulness?
2. What inspired you to start practicing mindfulness?
3. How do you practice mindfulness?

**Prompts:**

- Have you read any books on mindfulness?
- Do you go on meditation retreats or practice yoga?
- Do you practice with a meditation group or on your own?

4. How do you interpret mindfulness? What does mindfulness mean to you?
5. What were some of the challenges, if any, did you face when you first started practicing mindfulness?

**Mindfulness in present life and Influence on Classroom practices**

6. How has mindfulness impacted your life?
7. Do you think practicing mindfulness is relevant to your practice as a teacher? If so, how? Could you give me an examples?

**Follow-up Questions:**
Can you give an example or a story that helps show how mindfulness can help with teaching?

What are some ways that mindfulness is brought into your classroom?

Does it influence your interactions with your colleagues? Can you give an example or story when you think it did?

Does it influence your interactions with your students’ parents? Can you give an example or story when you think it did?

8. What aspect of mindfulness do you find the most helpful to your practice as a teacher? If you can, please describe a specific example, situation or practice that you use in the classroom.

9. How would you describe the characteristics of a teacher who practices mindfulness? What kinds of behaviours would you be able to recognize in a teacher who practices mindfulness?

Follow-up Questions:

• How would you say your practice has changed from before you started practicing mindfulness or how do you think it would be different if you stopped practicing mindfulness?

Future of Mindfulness practice – continuity and change

10. Do you see yourself continuing with the mindfulness process in the future?

11. Is there anything else you think is important in understanding your mindfulness practice or experience as an in-service teacher?