

Mindfulness Practitioners in the Classroom:

An Exploration of Lived Experiences

by

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## ABSTRACT

Within the past 10 years, there has been an increased interest in providing teachers with mindfulness training. This is due largely in part to the amount of stress that K-12 teachers report as a result of the profession and the research proposing that practicing mindfulness helps one cope with stress and offers the potential to promote one's well-being.

This qualitative study explores the intersection of mindfulness and K-12 teaching. Four K-12 teachers who self-identified as mindfulness practitioners were interviewed, and their lived experiences as mindfulness practitioners and teachers are explored throughout this study. Through in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviews, the participants' life histories in relation to becoming mindfulness practitioners and teachers are uncovered, as well as their experiences as mindfulness practitioners in the classroom, and their reflections upon what it means to be a mindfulness practitioner and a teacher.

For the participants in this study, they believed their mindfulness practices helped them cope with the demands of teaching. The participants also viewed mindfulness practices as a pedagogical tool for promoting their students' social and emotional well-being. As one of the first studies to explore teachers who have personal mindfulness practices and how those practices transfer or do not transfer into their professional experiences, it adds teachers' voices to the mindfulness in education phenomena.

To my sister, Erika:

Your personal experiences and stories of your students and  
colleagues inspired so much of this work.

Thank you for always listening and being a critic.

You always speak the truth.

If only we could keep teachers like you in the classroom...

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## CHAPTER ONE

### Introduction

Teachers are at the epicenter of students' educational experiences. It is the teacher who holds the responsibility for the conduct of the interactions and intercommunications of the classroom, which are the very life of the group as a community (Dewey, 1938, p. 53). A student's formal learning context is shaped largely by the teacher (Eccles & Roeser, 1999), so it is up to the teacher to provide the optimal classroom climate, one that is characterized by low levels of conflict, respectful communication, and support for the student's needs (LaParo & Pianta, 2003). "Teachers are expected to provide emotionally responsive support to *all* students...[and] successfully (yet respectfully) manage the challenging behaviors of increasing numbers of disruptive students, and handle the growing demands imposed by standardized testing" (Jennings, 2011, p. 133). We ask a lot of our teachers.

Unfortunately, we do little to support teachers to meet the demands necessary for providing an optimal learning environment. "Research has shown that teachers are exposed to a number of sources of stress" (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). In *Cultivating Teacher Renewal: Guarding Against Stress and Burnout*, Larrivee (2012, p.7) outlines some of the key challenges teachers face today that contribute to stress and burnout:

- The constant threat of teacher accountability for student performance
- Unsettling changes due to school transfers, building closings, and loss of jobs
- Loss of autonomy and control over the curriculum
- Excessive workload leading to lack of spontaneity and creativity
- Perpetual changes and expectations that are in constant flux with school reform efforts



- Conflict between school policy and one's own professional beliefs that can compromise a teacher's integrity
- Increase in the workflow they must manage
- Quantity replacing quality as the job becomes more bureaucratic than professional

As a result of such challenges, teaching has been identified as one of the most stressful professions (Blase & Kirby, 1991; Farber, 1991; Friedman, 2000; Goddard, O'Brien, & Goddard, 2006; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Smylie, 1999). It is also important to consider that the main sources of stress experienced by a particular teacher will be unique to him or her and will depend on the precise complex interaction between his or her personality, values, skills, and circumstances (Kyriacou, 2001, p. 29). Kyriacou is careful to point out that while we can highlight common sources of stress for teachers, we must be cautious and not overlook the specific concerns for individuals.

Unfortunately, little time is spent, if any, in pre-service or in-service training for teachers' personal development for exploring how they can cope the demands of teaching (Fairbanks et al., 2010; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Vinz, 1996). There is the assumption that teachers, upon receiving their licenses, are ready and capable of handling the social and emotional demands that are embedded in the profession and that they can continue to sustain the resilience to meet these demands. This is quite unfortunate considering teachers have been identified in the research literature as the most important school level factor in students' achievement, motivation and engagement (Midgley, Feldlaufer & Eccles, 1989; Pianta, 1999; Roeser, Eccles & Sameroff, 2000).

Teachers are obviously a crucial factor of students' educational experiences. So, as a society, we why do we neglect teachers' social and emotional well-being? Given the current era of high stakes testing, tightening budget constraints, and other increased

pressures, K-12 educators often encounter a cascade of stressors and warrant interventions to support their resilience and social–emotional competencies (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 15). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) propose that deficits in a teacher’s social and emotional competence and well-being may provoke teacher burnout and have devastating effects on classroom relationships, management, and climate (p. 492). How can we help teachers build resiliency and promote their social and emotional competence? “K-12 teachers, like their students, need and deserve supports to flourish, professionally and personally (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p.13).”

It appears that practicing mindfulness may help. Currently there is mindfulness movement underway promoting the benefits of daily conscious living. According to Palmer (1998/2007), “Movements represent the principle of flux and change: they are the process through which a society channels its energies for renewal and transformation” (p. 171). In this movement it appears there is a group of people who crave a sense of ease and permission to pause and reflect. Mindfulness practices provide us this permission to pause and thus induce a sense of ease. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a leader in this movement, proclaims stress is a universal experience, and we are learning more everyday about the negative effects it can have on the body, so in response there is a strong interest in how we can develop resiliency, which is a benefit of practicing mindfulness (Boyce, 2014, p. 36). Mindfulness practices provide us the tools and give us the permission to pause from our busy daily lives. The emerging research on practicing mindfulness proposes that it can help adults improve their health and well-being by reducing stress, anxiety, and depression (Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008; Ruff & Mackenzie 2009).

In addition to the research literature being developed on mindfulness, the concept is now mainstreaming through the media. One does not have to very look far to find the media touting the benefits of practicing mindfulness. *Time* magazine featured “The Mindful Revolution” on its February 3, 2014, cover. *Scientific American Mind* magazine followed a month later publishing “Sharpen Your Focus: How the Science of Mindfulness can Improve Attention and Lift Your Mood” on its cover. A few months later a new magazine hit the stands titled *Mindful*, a magazine devoted to “covering mindfulness for a mainstream audience” (Foundation for a Mindful Society, 2012).

In light of the overwhelming enthusiasm over practicing mindfulness, it only makes sense for these practices to be applied to the teaching profession, a profession that is marred by high levels of stress. For the past 10 years, exploratory studies on mindfulness in K-12 education have explored the extent to which practicing mindfulness could be of benefit to both students’ and teachers’ physical, emotional, and mental wellbeing (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 13).<sup>1</sup> Additionally within the last few years, books about mindfulness for teachers have become mainstream products available to the public. In a simple search using the key words “mindfulness and teachers,” six books emerge: *Mindful Teaching and Teaching Mindfulness: A Guide for Anyone Who Teaches Anything* (David & Sheth, 2009); *Everybody Present: Mindfulness in Education* (Rotne & Rotne, 2013); *Teach, Breathe, Learn: Mindfulness in and out of the Classroom*

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to note, although some may associate mindfulness with Buddhism, it can be taught and experienced in a completely secular way. This will be explained further in Chapter Two.

(Srinivasan, 2014); *The Invisible Classroom: Relationships, Neuroscience, and Mindfulness at Work in School* (Olson, 2014); *The Way of Mindful Education: Cultivating Well-Being in Teachers and Students* (Rechtschaffen, 2014); *Mindfulness for Teachers: Simple Skills for Peace and Productivity in the Classroom* (Jennings, 2015). Five of these six books were published within the last two years. All six of these books provide the rationale why teachers should practice mindfulness, instructions on how to practice mindfulness, as well as explanations and examples for how teachers can use mindfulness practices in the classroom with their students.

### **Statement of Purpose and the Research Question**

There are no negative side effects to learning and practicing mindfulness. Practicing mindfulness, it appears, is as healthy for the mind and brain as physical exercise is for the body. However, “Quiet sessions on a meditation cushion can contrast sharply with the complex dynamics of the classroom” (Brown, 2011, p. 75). Unfortunately, long-term studies regarding mindfulness training and teachers have yet to be published, so we do not know the extent to which teachers are able to continue practicing their mindfulness activities or how it affects their work in the classroom over longer periods of time. In the Mind and Life Education Research Network’s (MLERN) article (2012), “Contemplative Practices and Mental Training: Prospects for American Education,” the authors propose that future mindfulness in education studies should focus on whether skills learned in a contemplative practice, such as mindfulness meditation, transfer to the contexts of teaching and learning in the classroom, and we should work to understand what factors inhibit or facilitate such a transfer.

Additionally, there is another significant gap in the literature on mindfulness and teachers: what about the teacher who has a mindfulness practice who has not participated in a training program designed specifically for teachers? It is important to recognize that one does not have to participate in a formal mindfulness-based training program in order to practice mindfulness. For anyone interested in learning more about mindfulness or how to practice, there are a plethora of resources available. For instance, Dr. Andrew Weil, best-selling author, founder, professor, and director of the Arizona Center for Integrative Medicine at the University of Arizona, who has been a frequent guest on *Oprah* and the *Today Show*, advocates the use of mindfulness meditation and breathing for decreasing stress and improving one's overall health. Dr. Weil sells audio and print guides and provides free ideas and resources on his web site for those interested in practicing mindfulness. In addition, there are publishers (e.g. Sounds True and Shambhala Publications) and web sties (e.g. mindful.org and wisebrain.org) that offer information on mindfulness practices and the research on the benefits of practicing, as well as guidance on how to practice mindfulness. A search for the term "mindfulness" on Amazon.com yields nearly 6,000 results. Books and resources abound for the lay practitioner who would like to learn and practice mindfulness. There is a great deal we do not know about teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners and whether or not their mindfulness practices transfer into their classroom experiences.

According to Booth, Colomb, and Williams (2008) a research problem is driven by "incomplete knowledge or flawed understanding," and we solve that problem "not by changing the world but by understanding it better" (p. 59). In an attempt to understand the mindfulness in education phenomena, I designed a qualitative study to explore the

experiences and perceptions of four K-12 teachers who self-identified as a mindfulness practitioners. Guided by MLERN's (2012) suggestion to investigate how teachers who have a mindfulness practice are able to transfer those to the contexts of teaching and learning in the classroom, and how we should work to understand what factors inhibit or facilitate such a transfer, I conducted in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviews with four participants to gather their personal, storied perspectives (Deznin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 16).

Therefore, the purpose of this qualitative study was to explore the phenomena of being a teacher who self-identifies as a mindfulness practitioner and to investigate how he or she reflects upon his or her classroom experiences. The grand tour question (Cresswell, 2007) for this study was, *How do teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners conceptualize their classroom experiences?* Through a series of interview questions, I construct the participants' conceptualizations of their classroom experiences.

### **Significance of the Study**

In this study I am not interested in trying to prove that teachers who are mindfulness practitioners are better or happier than teachers who do not practice mindfulness. I was explaining my study to someone, and she asked "What do you mean by mindfulness?" I explained how there is a movement underway where people are realizing that meditation is not just something for Buddhists, and how yoga is helping people learn to be in the moment, non-judgmentally. So, I basically said I am interested in teachers who have any sort of contemplative practice who consider themselves a mindfulness practitioner. Her reply was, "Well, I know some people who meditate and do yoga, and they can be real shits." I laughed and appreciated her comment because it

always helps remind me to emphasize practicing meditation, yoga, tai chi, whatever the contemplative practice is, does not mean you are a better, more evolved person just because you do this. This is not a study on teacher quality. I recognize practicing mindfulness does not necessarily make one a good teacher. However, we know teaching is one of the most stressful occupations. If we are going to continue to tout the successes and positive effects of mindfulness practices for teachers, we need to know more about the teacher who identifies as mindfulness practitioner and the realities of his or her daily working situations.

This study was designed to add to the current research on the mindfulness in education phenomenon. In addition to exploring this phenomenon, I wanted to give teachers a voice to expand upon the research on mindfulness in education. I designed this study to be an exploration of four teachers' personal and professional teaching experiences in an attempt to understand their lived experiences of being a person who identifies as a mindfulness practitioner and how that does or does not translate into his or her work in classroom. The findings from this study hold implications for administrators, curriculum designers for teacher education programs, and organizations that teach mindfulness in schools.

### **Structure of the Study**

This study is about four K-12 teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners. It is an exploration of their lived experiences as mindfulness practitioners, as K-12 teachers, and the intersection between those two experiences. The existing research on teachers and mindfulness at best only provides a glimpse of the teachers' stories and experiences surrounding the use of mindfulness practices in the classroom.

Additionally the research literature neglects the teachers who have personal mindfulness practices and how they do or do not transfer those practices into their teaching experiences. In this study, I sought to add teachers' voices to the conversation on mindfulness and education by answering the question, "How do teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners conceptualize their classroom experiences?"

In the following chapters, I expand upon the concepts of mindfulness, the teaching profession, and the participants in this study. Chapter Two provides a review of the research literature on mindfulness. This review provides explanations of mindfulness and the various perspectives on the concept, as well as the research surrounding mindfulness and then more explicitly focuses on the research on teachers and mindfulness practices. This chapter also provides a review of the literature on some of the key issues affecting teachers, namely stress, burnout, attrition, and resiliency, to provide the reader with an understanding of the intersection of the two key topics in this study: mindfulness and teachers. In Chapter Three, I provide an explanation of the methodology I used to conduct this study, as well as my personal perspective explaining how I fit into this study. The results of this study are presented in Chapter Four. This chapter contains the participants' profiles and the themes that emerged from the data, thus illuminating the phenomenon of mindfulness practitioners in the classroom and their experiences. Chapter Five concludes this study with a discussion of two major conclusions drawn in relation to the research findings and the possible implications for this study.



## **CHAPTER TWO**

### **Literature Review**

The purpose of this chapter is to review the literature related to the research question, “How do teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners conceptualize their classroom experiences?” To better understand the phenomenon of being a mindfulness practitioner and a teacher, I outline the research literature in this chapter into two major sections: mindfulness and the key issues affecting the K-12 teaching profession, thus guiding the conceptual framework for this study. The literature comprising this review consists of studies from scholarly books or refereed journals. Utilizing Google Scholar, EBSCOhost, and the American Mindfulness Research Association, I discovered key pieces of research that allowed me to select the most prominent pieces of research for each of the categories and sub-categories presented in this chapter.

To provide a thorough analysis on the intersection of “mindfulness” and “teachers,” I first explain mindfulness as it appears in the research literature. I also address the association between contemplative practices and mindfulness, as these concepts are often used interchangeably or in relation to each other in the research literature. Then, I present the research on mindfulness practices in an attempt to provide an explanation of the phenomenon of mindfulness. I close the section on mindfulness by presenting the research on mindfulness and teachers.

To explain the interest and need of mindfulness practices for teachers, I present in the next major section of this chapter the research on teacher stress and burnout, two key

issues affecting K-12 teachers, and the effects of stress and burnout, teacher attrition. I then review the literature on teachers and resiliency in order to examine the possible factors that keep teachers in the profession.

## **Mindfulness**

**Conceptions of Mindfulness.** There are multiple conceptions of “mindfulness,” and because of this researchers have expressed the need to find a conceptual framework to guide their work of understanding mindfulness in research practices (Albrecht, Albrecht, & Cohen, 2012; Harnett & Dawe, 2012; Ospina et al., 2007). However, this has become a challenging task. As Albrecht (2014) points out, “Each thinker, writer, or researcher’s understanding and foundation for defining the construct is reflected in the dynamic interplay of interacting factors, such as his or her unique world view, subscription to a religious or philosophical tradition; academic discipline; meditation experience and prejudices or biases” (p. 22). I find this to be quite true. Someone once asked me to show him mindfulness. I just stared at him. Mindfulness is not something we can necessarily observe. Plus, it is subjective. I could behave in what I consider a mindful manner, but another person may say my behavior is not quite so mindful according to his or her standards.

Given this complexity, I found it helpful to draw upon a notion presented by the editors of *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Mindfulness* (Le, Ngnoumen, & Langer, 2014) in order to provide a construct of mindfulness and to explain how mindfulness became a phenomenon. According to the editors, there are two main conceptions of mindfulness: one Eastern and one Western. I found this East and West concept helpful because it draws upon the work of two pioneers in the field of mindfulness: Ellen Langer

and Jon Kabat-Zinn. Additionally, it opens up the framework for exploring both the secular, psychological aspect of mindfulness and the spiritual, psychological aspect of mindfulness.

The Western conception of mindfulness emerged around the 1970s thanks in part to the innovative work on mindlessness and choice by social psychologist Ellen Langer (Alexander, Langer, Newman, Chandler, & Davis, 1989; Langer, Blank, & Chanowitz, 1978; Langer, Beck, Janoff-Bulman, & Timko, 1984; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2000). Langer's concept of mindfulness originated from a social psychological approach and is independent of any reference to Eastern contemplative traditions (Ie, Ngnoumen, & Langer, 2014, p. 1). It was through her research on mindlessness that Langer began studying what she considered the opposite of mindlessness – mindfulness. What Langer observes in her research is when people are mindless, they treat information as though it were context free; they tend to be trapped by categories and exhibit automatic behavior, not considering the possible novelty in a situation or other perspectives (Langer, 1989). We are mindful, according to Langer (1989), when we seek out, create, and notice new things.

For example, in a landmark study Langer along with fellow researcher Judith Rodin conducted an experiment with nursing home patients (1976, 1977). One group of patients was given the ability to make decisions, such as where to receive visitors. They were also given a houseplant to care for. The patients had to decide where to place the plant and when to feed it. In her book *Counterclockwise: Mindful Health and the Power of Possibility* (2009) Langer states, “Our intent was to make the nursing home residents more mindful, to help them engage with the world and live their lives more fully” (p. 4).

In contrast, the other group of nursing home patients in this experiment, the control group, did not receive instructions to make any decisions, and they were told the nursing staff would take care of the houseplants they had been given. What Langer and Rodin discovered a year and a half later based upon a series of tests the researchers conducted before and after the experiment was that the first group of patients were more cheerful and active. In her research on mindfulness versus mindlessness, that spans nearly forty years, Langer has discovered that mindfulness offers potential benefits in areas such as aging, mental and physical health, behavioral regulation, interpersonal relationships, creativity, and the workplace (Langer, Ngnoumen, & Langer, 2014, p. 1). Langer characterizes mindfulness as a universal human capacity that is gained by being present and open to novelty and distinction (Langer, 1989).

Around the late 1970s, another branch of mindfulness, one derived from an Eastern concept, emerged. Jon Kabat-Zinn, PhD was perplexed by the amount of patients at the hospital where he worked who were not responding to traditional medical treatment for their chronic pain and stress. Kabat-Zinn, a meditator and student of Buddhism, drew from ancient traditions of self-inquiry and healing. He adapted his Buddhist training in mindfulness for a secular, clinical setting. In 1979 Kabat-Zinn began teaching an eight-week course known then as the Stress Reduction and Relaxation Program (SR&RP) at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. SR&RP utilized a new branch of medicine known as behavioral medicine, which believes that mental and emotional factors can have a significant effect upon our physical health and our capacity to recover from illness and injury (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/1991/2005, p. 1). The SR&RP course combined meditation and Hatha yoga to help patients cope with stress and pain by using

mindfulness, or moment-to-moment awareness. Today Kabat-Zinn's eight-week program is known as Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), and "Over 250 medical centers around the United States offer mindfulness-based stress reduction programs" (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007, p. 109).

Research reveals MBSR has the ability to elicit positive changes in the brain, help with processing stress, and improve the immune system (Kabat-Zinn, Lipworth, & Burney, 1985; Kabat-Zinn et al., 1992; Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Additionally, a meta-analysis of MBSR studies suggest that MBSR may help a broad range of individuals cope with clinical and nonclinical problems, such as pain cancer, heart disease, depression, and anxiety (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004).

In his book *Full Catastrophe Living: Using the Wisdom of Your Body and Mind to Face Stress, Pain, and Illness* (1990/1991/2005), Kabat-Zinn explains,

Simply put mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness. It is cultivated by purposefully paying attention to things we ordinarily never give a moment's thought to. It is a systematic approach to developing new kinds of control and wisdom in our lives, based upon our inner capacities for relaxation, paying attention, and insight (p. 2).

To explain this concept it helps to consider three interrelated mental skills and dispositions that contribute to mindfulness: (a) focusing one's attention on the here and now; (b) calmly and clearly being in the present moment; (c) experiencing the moment as it is, resisting mental judgments or critical labels (Young, 2011, as cited in Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings 2012).

Both Langer and Kabat-Zinn's conception of mindfulness focus on the attention to the present moment and adhere to the idea of the mind and body monism (Ie, Ngnoumen, & Langer, 2014, p. 2). However, Kabat-Zinn's conception of mindfulness is rooted heavily in Buddhist meditative traditions and their teachings and practices. Meditation is at the core of Kabat-Zinn's conception of practicing mindfulness. Langer's approach to mindfulness does not entail meditation or any influence from Buddhism. In her book *Mindfulness* (1989), which is based largely upon her research findings of mindlessness versus mindfulness, Langer states, "My work on mindfulness has been conducted almost entirely within the Western scientific perspective" (p. 78). Regardless of their differences, both camps, the Eastern and Western conceptions, have enriched the field of mindfulness and have generated greater awareness and appreciation for the wealth of the benefits gained from the remarkable simple process of acknowledging novel experiences (Ie, Ngnoumen, & Langer, 2014, p. 3).

**Contemplative Practices and Mindfulness.** Although I use the word "mindfulness" and not "contemplative" in this study, I do think it is important to note the association between the two terms. Some researchers such as the Mind and Life Education Research Network (MLERN) use the word "contemplative" when speaking of practices such as meditation and yoga (2012). The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society (2011) explains contemplative practices as something that entails single-minded concentration.

Contemplative practices quiet the mind in order to cultivate a personal capacity for deep concentration and insight. Examples of contemplative practice include not only sitting in silence but also many forms of single-minded concentration

including meditation, contemplative prayer, mindful walking, focused experiences in nature, yoga and other contemporary physical or artistic practices. We also consider various kinds of ritual and ceremony designed to create sacred space and increase insight and awareness to be forms of contemplative practice (What are Contemplative Practices, 2011).

Mindfulness is the heart of a contemplative practice. One cannot be contemplative if he or she is not mindful, thus, “brining one’s complete attention to the present experience on a moment-to-moment basis” (Marlatt & Kristeller, 1999, as cited in Jha et al, 2007). The two concepts are intertwined. However, I chose to use “mindfulness practices” throughout this study rather than “contemplative practices” due in part to Langer’s (1989) assertion that one simply needs to be present and open to novelty and distinction to be mindful. I wanted to reinforce that acting mindfully does not require meditation or other practices often associated with religious traditions.

**The Research on Practicing Mindfulness.** Research citing the benefits of mindfulness may account for the dramatic rise and interest in mindfulness. Roeser and Zelazo (2012) analyzed peer-reviewed research publications on mindful practices (i.e. meditation and yoga), and they discovered a dramatic rise in the amount of peer-reviewed research publications from 2000 to 2011. In 2000 there were approximately twenty peer-reviewed publications on mindfulness; in 2011 there were 303. It is believed that we now have the research to show some of the benefits of mindfulness. For example, advances in research on neuroplasticity, a term used to describe the brain’s capacity for creating new neural connections and its ability to grow new neurons in response to experience, has demonstrated that we have the ability to change our brains throughout our lifetime baring

any significant damage occurring to the brain (Kandel, Schwartz, & Jessel; 2000, Doidge, 2007; Stiles, 2008). The brain regions affected by mindfulness training include executive functioning (cognitive processes) and the regulation of emotions (Meikeljohn et al, 2012). The research suggests that mindfulness is associated with attentional control and other indicators of concentrative capabilities (Chambers, Lo, & Allen, 2007; Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007). A longitudinal randomized control study of forty meditation naive participants was conducted to test if regular, brief mindfulness training could foster changes in neuronal activity related to attention control (Moore, Gruber, Derose & Malinowski, 2012). The results of the study suggest that mindfulness meditation may alter the efficiency of allocating cognitive resources, leading to improved self-regulation of attention.

In addition, new ideas emerged and advanced in the field of positive psychology thus shifting psychological research from the preoccupation of pathology to the study of building positive qualities at the subjective level (e.g. well-being, optimism), at the individual level (e.g. courage, interpersonal skills), and at the group level (e.g. civic virtues, tolerance) (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000, p.5). This field of research has prompted many investigations on how mindfulness practices can affect our individual and collective well-being because practicing mindfulness is theorized to have widespread effects on human functioning and behavior (Brown, Ryan, & Cresswell, 2007, p. 211). For example, researchers have explored the notion of cultivating mindfulness and its relationship to well-being. Empirical studies claim practicing mindfulness can support the role of promoting one's psychological well-being by promoting the ability to self-regulate one's behavior and promoting positive emotional states through the emphasis of



acceptance and nonjudgmental awareness and attention (Brown & Ryan, 2003; Carlson & Brown, 2005; Baer, Lykins, & Peters, 2012; Bowlin & Baer, 2012; Hassed, de Lisle, Sullivan, & Pier, 2009; Shapiro, Oman, Thoresen, Plantel, & Flinders, 2008).

Furthermore in their January 2012 newsletter, the National Institutes of Health published an article titled "Mindfulness Matters" advocating the practice of mindfulness citing that mindfulness practices may help people manage stress, cope better with serious illness, reduce anxiety and depression. Because of the simplicity of the practices and the potential positive effects, interest in mindfulness and its possible effects on mental health, well-being, physical health, self-regulation, and interpersonal behavior has grown exponentially over the past twenty years (Brown, Ryan, & Cresswell, 2007, p. 211).

**Interpersonal Benefits of Mindfulness.** Mindfulness has not just been associated with intrapersonal benefits; there are also some interpersonal benefits to practicing mindfulness. A connection between practicing mindfulness and the potential impact on interpersonal relationships comes from the research of Wachs and Cordova (2007). Although their study was conducted on married couples, Wachs and Cordova's research helps explain how can mindfulness affect our relationships with others through the concept of mindful relating. Mindful relating holds that an open and receptive attention to the present moment (mindfulness) promotes a more accepting and less experientially avoidant orientation to challenging emotions such that more responsive and relationally healthy modes of responding become possible (p. 464). Furthermore, mindfulness practices can help us be more empathetic (Shapiro, Schwartz & Bonner, 1998), a characteristic that is likely to influence the maintenance of relationships and ultimately lead to relationship satisfaction (Davis & Oathout, 1987; Hansson, Jones, & Carpenter,

1984). The research conducted on empathy suggests that the ability to compassionately understand another person's emotional experience often leads to a deeper sense of intimacy and a higher level of relationship satisfaction (Davis & Oathout, 1987; Long & Andrews, 1990; Long, Angera, Carter, Nakamoto, & Kalso, 1999).

Given the possible benefits, mindfulness training and application has moved beyond clinical settings and is now infiltrating professions such as law (e.g. Riskin, 2002), business (e.g. Reb & Narayanan, 2012), social work (e.g. Berceci, 2006), and nursing (Cohen-Katz, Wiley, Capuano, Baker, & Shapiro, 2004) to help professionals cope with stress and promote their well being. Given the research that touts the benefits of mindfulness, progressive companies like Google have put mindfulness at the center of the company's people development scheme. Google engineer Chade-Meng Tan has even enlisted the assistance of mindfulness experts, such as Jon Kabat-Zinn, to present mindfulness research and practices to employees at Google.

In summary, mindfulness can be practiced through meditation and contemplation, and it may be cultivated by paying attention to everyday activities, such as eating, gardening, and listening (Albrecht, 2014, p. 21). Mindfulness can be measured as a trait, induced as a temporary state, or developed in response to some extensive mindfulness training, such as meditation (Brown, Ryan, & Creswell, 2007).

**A Review of the Research on Mindfulness Training for Teachers.** Mindfulness can be integrated into the classroom three different ways: indirectly (meaning the teacher develops personal mindfulness practices and embodies mindfulness attitudes and behaviors throughout the day); directly (students are taught mindfulness skills); a combination of direct and indirect (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 4). Because this study

focuses on teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners, I omitted the research literature on the direct approach where only students are taught mindfulness practice. The literature reviewed here addresses the indirect and combination approach of mindfulness practices for K-12 teachers.

In order to understand the indirect and combination approaches to integrating mindfulness in education, it helps to understand who is providing the mindfulness training for the teachers. Currently, there are many organizations devoted to helping educate and train teachers, and sometimes students, in secular mindfulness practices (e.g. MindUP, Mindful Schools, Inner Resilience Program, CARE for Teachers). A review of the research on mindfulness programs for K-12 teachers reveals that these programs utilize two main curricular dimensions: social and emotional learning (SEL) and stress management skills. The social and emotional skills component is provided to help teachers build emotional resilience and a greater understanding of how their emotions affect the work they are doing in the classroom. These programs utilize a variety of reflective exercises, such as journaling, whole group discussion, and role-playing, to help teachers identify and reflect upon the experiences of particular emotions (Jennings, 2011; Soloway, Poulin, Mackenzie, 2011). The stress management skills are where the mindfulness practices come in because mindfulness practices involve two primary components: self-regulation of attention and nonjudgmental awareness. Therefore, these programs claim by educating teachers on SEL and various mindfulness practices, this type of training can help teachers overcome the tendency to make automatic, reactive appraisals of what they are experiencing, and thus increase their level of mindfulness and reduce habitual patterns of response that may be causing them stress. Chang (2009) notes

these "... habitual patterns in teachers' judgments about student behavior and other teaching tasks may contribute significantly to teachers' repeated experience of unpleasant emotions and those emotions may eventually lead to burnout" (p.193).

In addition to the organizations that provide mindfulness training for teachers, there are researchers who document the use of mindfulness training for teachers in order to advance the body of knowledge on mindfulness practices and the possible effects it could have on teachers and students (i.e.Napoli, 2004; Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Karazsia, & Singh, 2013). Overall, the mindfulness-based programs for teachers, regardless of who is running them, focus on helping the teachers develop a personal mindfulness practice and explore how the teachers can embody these mindfulness attitudes and behaviors throughout the school day (Meiklejohn et al, 2012, p.4).

In the studies on mindfulness training (MT) and teachers, the application of mindfulness skills are adapted to the specific demands of teaching, and teachers are provided support through weekly meetings involving group mindfulness practices and discussions of the practices. Most often, mindfulness is taught through the use of meditation. This can be practiced formally, such as sitting or lying down meditation, or informally, such as yoga movements or walking. Sometimes recordings of prescribed mindfulness practices are provided for the teachers, so they can practice mindfulness at home.

Most of the mindfulness-based interventions with teachers examine the teacher-participants' abilities to cope with the demands of being a teacher. Acting with awareness, i.e. increase in mindfulness, is one common measurement outlined in the studies. Several studies reveal after participating in a MT program, teacher-participants

report an increased ability to act with greater awareness of their emotional reactivity and an increase in the ability to self-regulate, thus feeling more mindful (Jennings, Snowberg, Coccia, & Greenberg, 2011; Frank, Reibel, Broderick, Cantrell & Metz, 2013; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson, 2013; Lantieri, Kyse, Harnett, Malkmus, 2011; Napoli, 2004; Roeser, Schonert-Reichl, Jha, Cullen, Wallace, Wilensky, Oberle, Thomson, Taylor, & Harrison, 2013; Singh, Lancioni, Winton, Karazsia & Singh, 2013). Often the teacher-participants reporting find the development and practice of mindfulness to be helpful for creating inner-balance, meaning they felt the practices helped them regulate their internal states, including their emotions, and their attention. As a result of these studies, it is theorized that mindfulness practices help teachers more effectively manage their stress on the job and, thereby, better attend to the interpersonal and instructional complexities of teaching and learning (Roeser et al., 2013). For example, Jennings and colleagues (2011) noted teachers exhibited a significant increase in their interpersonal mindfulness ratings as a result of their MT. Participants were asked to answer the question, “When I am upset with my students, I notice how I am feeling before taking action” (p. 41). The teachers’ ratings were significantly higher on the post-test. As result of their increase in self-awareness and overall well-being, the teacher-participants also noticed an improvement in their students’ prosocial behavior, on-task behavior, and academic performance (Jennings et al., 2011). It appears by altering their actions the teachers noticed a change in their students’ actions.

Studies have also measured teacher-participants’ stress levels in relation to before MT and after MT. These studies reveal reductions in psychological symptoms and burnout, such as lowered anxiety levels (Anderson, Levinson, Barker, & Kiewra, 1999;

Gold et al, 2009) and improvements in observer-rated classroom organization and performance (Flook et al., 2013). Additionally studies report that teacher-participants also reported gains in self-compassion (Frank et al., 2013; Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013). Kristen Neff (2003a) conceptualizes self-compassion as being distinct from self-esteem in that it is non-evaluative. Self-compassion, according to Neff (2003b), consists of several elements, including a kind and nonjudgmental attitude toward oneself when suffering; recognition that one's experiences are part of the larger, more universal human experience; and the holding of painful thoughts and feelings in balanced awareness, accepting and observing them without judgment, rumination, or self-pity. An increase in self-compassion is a significant factor for teachers since self-compassion has been linked to empathetic concern, altruism, lower levels of emotional turmoil and higher levels of relational well-being (Neff & Pommier, 2012; Yarnell & Neff, 2012).

Furthermore, the research on mindfulness training and teachers offers some implications for why it should be offered as professional development. Teachers who participated in the Inner Resilience Program (IRP) identified significant positive effects in relational trust with colleagues (Lantieri et al., 2011). A 2009 study evaluating the CARE program conducted by Wellspring Consulting revealed eighty-four percent of the participants who responded said CARE was highly important or important for their professional development (Jennings, 2011, p. 140). Teachers in this study also reported they believed CARE helped them become more aware of how to cultivate well-being within themselves and how to cope with the emotional demands of teaching. In addition, Roeser et al (2013) also noted the vast majority of the participants who completed their

MT (87%) said they would recommend the program to peers and school principals given the perceived benefit they derived from it (p. 799).

Aside from the mindfulness training programs provided for teachers, there is a paucity of research examining teachers' self-reports of mindfulness in relation to their classroom experiences. To date there is only one published report of teachers who were asked to self-report their perceived levels of mindfulness (Jennings, 2014). The results were measured utilizing a web-based survey. In this study, Jennings examined the data from thirty-five preschool teachers' self-reports of well-being, mindfulness, and self-compassion in relation to classroom observations and semi-structured interviews with the participants. The findings from this study suggest mindfulness and self-compassion may play an important role in teacher and classroom quality, and that mindfulness and self-compassion are important contributors to supporting teachers' well-being and social and emotional competence.

In addition to the research on in-service teachers, there are a few select teacher preparation programs that offer an elective course on mindfulness for their pre-service teachers. Some of the schools include the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto (OISE/UT), Teachers College at Columbia University, and Bowdoin College in New Brunswick, Maine. As of date, only the program at OISE/UT has published research of their mindfulness program for pre-service teachers. The research on the program at OISE/UT reveals pre-service teachers report a greater awareness of their emotional reactivity and a perceived ability to self-regulate their emotions (Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, & Karayolas, 2008). A follow-up study

conducted on the course revealed that mindfulness improved the pre-serviced teachers' self-efficacy and physical health ratings (Soloway, Poulin, & Mackenzie, 2011).

It is important to note that long-term studies have yet to be published on mindfulness training and in-services teachers, so we do not know the extent to which teachers are able to continue their mindfulness practices or how it affects their work in the classroom over longer periods of time. However, "Research suggests that the stress management or coping skills used by more resilient people can be taught to those at risk, allowing them to learn to manage stress effectively" (Lantieri, et al., 2011, p. 267), so it is worth investigating the long-term results of such training.

### **Key Issues Affecting the K-12 Teaching Profession**

To explain the need and the significance of the research on mindfulness and teachers, it is important to review the literature on three key issues affecting the K-12 teaching profession: stress, burnout, and attrition.

**Teacher Stress.** Teachers experience high levels of occupational stress (Dunham & Varma, 1998; International Labour Office, 1993; Kyriacou, 2000; Travers & Cooper, 1996). "Lazarus and Folkman (1984) define stress as a particular interaction between the person and the environment, appraised or evaluated by the person as being taxing or exceeding his or her personal resources, and, as a consequence, disrupting his or her daily routines" (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005, p. 460). Simply put stress can occur when a person's usual way of doing things is inadequate for the demands of the situation. Teacher stress can be "...defined as the experience by a teacher of unpleasant, negative emotions, such as anger, anxiety, tension, frustration or depression, resulting from some aspect of his or her work as a teacher" (Kyriacou, 2001, p. 28). Therefore, stress can



occur at varying levels and is a subjective response. Perceptions of the balance between perceived demands and perceived coping skills for dealing with the demands are critical variables in determining whether a person will or will not experience harmful stress levels (Sapolsky, 1998). Turk, Meeks, and Turk (1982) conducted a comprehensive review of the sources of teacher stress. They identified seven consistent problem areas: school environments, student misbehavior, poor working conditions, personal concerns of the teacher, relationships with parents, time pressures, and inadequacy of training. In a more recent analysis on studies reporting teacher stress, Kyriacou (2001) found somewhat similar results. Kyriacou reports the main sources of teacher stress stem from teaching students who lack motivation, maintaining discipline in the classroom, confronting general time pressures and workload demands, being exposed to a large amount of change, being evaluated by others, having difficult or challenging relationships with colleagues, administration, or management, and being exposed to generally poor working conditions (p. 29).

**Burnout.** Some degree of stress in a school environment is to be expected; however, it is the chronic exposure to stress that has both mental and physical side effects (Larrivee, 2012, p. 5). Dunham and Varma's (1998) research on teachers shows a relationship between the stressors of teaching and physiological effects, such as the feeling of being physically and mentally exhausted at the end of the day. Signs of such imbalance, meaning too much stress, may lead to burnout (Larrivee, 2012, p. 5). Freudenberger (1974) coined the term "burnout" to describe the "wearing out" of human service professionals (Larrivee, 2012, p. 9). Burnout is the mental, physical, and emotional exhaustion that results from chronic stress and frustration from one's job.

Freudenberger theorizes those in helping professions can discover the more they give of themselves, the more others will take, thus causing exhaustion.

The research on burnout and teachers emerged in the early 1980's, and Larrivee (2012) claims, "Since then, the concept of burnout has come to be used more in connection with teachers than with any other group" (p. 9). Considering the research shows many people are drawn to teaching by a strong service ethic and attribute great importance to intrinsic motivation (Lortie, 1975; Swanson-Owens, 1986), teachers may be at risk of burnout more than other professionals. As teachers enter the profession out of the desire to help and serve others, they may find, as Freudenberger theorized, they are susceptible to being mentally and physically drained by those that need them if they are not prepared to cope with others' demands.

According to Farber's (1991) estimates between five percent and 20 percent of the teachers in the United States experience burnout, and this affects the schools' climate by lowering moral, preventing the attainment of educational objectives, and increasing the probability of teachers leaving the profession all together. In their meta-analysis of sixty-five studies on teacher stress between the years of 1998-2003, Montgomery and Rupp (2005) observed a high average correlation between emotional response variables and burnout, "...showing that the degree in which teachers emotionally respond to stressful events and how satisfied they are as a consequence has a strong influence on the degree of burnout they experience" (p. 479). Burnout for teachers is often the end product of cumulative unsuccessful attempts to deal with classroom demands. "Emotional stress and poor emotion management consistently rank as the primary reasons teachers become dissatisfied and leave teaching" (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005,

as cited in Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p. 497). High levels of teacher stress not only induce burnout, but Cheney and Barringer (1995) assert teachers' stress levels can negatively affect their relationships with students, especially those students who are labeled "at-risk." When concluding their meta-analysis of studies on teacher stress, Montgomery and Rupp (2005) argue, "...understanding and uncovering negative emotions related to external stressors is the first step towards better performance, a higher degree of professional satisfaction, and, consequently, a higher level of teacher retention" (p. 483). Investigating the research on teacher stress and burnout in relation to coping skills and resiliency is important because, "What people do depends on what they think and feel- their internal states" (Leithwood, 2006, p.13).

**Teacher Attrition.** Ingersoll and Smith (2013) analyzed the data from the nationally representative Schools and Staffing Survey (SASS) and its supplement, the Teacher Followup Survey (TFS), the largest and most comprehensive data source available on teachers. "The data suggest that after just five years, between 40 and 50 percent of all beginning teachers have left the profession" (p. 32). The top four reasons teachers give for leaving the profession are: poor salary, poor administrative support, student discipline problems, and lack of faculty influence and autonomy (Ingersoll, 2003, p. 16).

While some attrition could be considered positive, depending upon who leaves and for what reason, high rates of attrition disrupt efforts to build a strong organizational culture (Johnson, Kraft & Papay, 2012, p.4) and thus undermine continuity in instruction (Loeb, Darling-Hammond & Luczak, 2005, p. 46). Considering the average cost of recruiting, hiring, preparing, and then losing a teacher, according to the National

Educational Association, is estimated to be \$50,000 (as cited in Vail, 2005), it is apparent that these costs can severely drain the educational system. Furthermore, such a high rate of attrition is additionally problematic when the literature documenting successful schools reveals that teacher satisfaction is one of the factors contributing to a school's success (Chenoweth, 2007, 2009; Dillon, 2010; Ferguson, Hackman, Hanna, & Ballantine, 2010). It appears for a school to be successful it needs satisfied teachers working there.

**Teacher Resiliency.** Whether they find it stressful or not, there are teachers who remain in the profession. A shift in focus from teacher stress and burnout to resilience may provide a promising perspective to understand the ways that teachers manage and sustain their motivation and commitment. Resiliency is "... defined as the capacity to continue to 'bounce back,' to recover strengths or spirit quickly and efficiently in the face of adversity" (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1302). It is also multidimensional and socially constructed thereby making it both a product of personal and professional dispositions and values and socially constructed meanings (Howard, Dryden, & Johnson 1999; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Rutter, 1990). "Masten (1994) cautions against the use of 'resiliency' that carries the misleading connotation of a discrete personality trait and recommends that 'resilience' be used exclusively when referring to the maintenance of positive adjustment under challenging life conditions" (Luthar et al., 2000, p. 546, as cited in Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1305). Gu and Day further explain, "An individual may demonstrate resilience in a certain context and/or in a certain professional/life phase, but fail to display similar qualities when time or space changes" (p. 1305).

A strong sense of self-efficacy is an essential component of teacher resilience (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1312). According to Bandura (2000), self-efficacy is when, “Those who have a strong belief in their capabilities redouble their effort to master the challenges [they face]” (p. 120). Teacher efficacy, a form of self-efficacy, is a self-perception that represents teachers’ beliefs that their efforts, individually or collectively, will bring about student learning (Ross, 1998, p. 49). Beijaard, Verloop, and Vermunt (2000) observe, “Teachers’ perceptions of their own professional identity affect their efficacy and professional development as well as their ability and willingness to cope with educational change and to implement innovations in their own teaching practice” (p. 749). Self-efficacy requires creativity, problem-solving, and self-management (Larrivee, 2012, p. 13). Unfortunately, the work and the lives of such teachers have been slightly neglected in the research; we know a lot more about the teachers that leave and the reasons they leave the profession than about the teachers who adapt, or at the very least survive (Gu & Day, 2007, p. 1303).

In looking at the research on the resiliency of K-12 teachers working in the United States, I found only a handful of studies that provide insight on why teachers remain in the profession. For example, Stanford’s (2001) study of ten veteran elementary teachers teaching in an urban environment illuminated some of the factors of these teachers’ resiliency. The teachers expressed finding deep meaning in their work, namely their commitment to making a difference in their students’ lives. Stanford quickly pointed out, “...the teachers’ talk was not of dazzling success stories but rather of seeing growth occur month to month and receiving occasional thanks from former students” (p. 84). Additionally, the teachers in Stanford’s study valued support from colleagues, family,

churches and spiritual beliefs and attributed these factors to being able to stay in the profession for ten years or more.

Another study from Patterson, Collins, and Abbot (2004) gathered data from eight teachers teaching in urban schools. They discovered that resilient teachers acted from a set of values when making decisions. For example, the teachers in the study spoke of the role of social justice in their classroom (p. 6). The resilient teachers in this study also acknowledged the professional development they received at their schools and districts were not always helpful, so they sought their own meaningful professional development opportunities. The teachers were also able to recognize that bureaucratic demands can sap their energy for teaching, so they developed ways to navigate, and at times avoid, those demands (p. 9).

Brunetti's (2006) study of nine "experienced teachers," meaning they had six years or more of experience, revealed the teachers remained in the profession because they expressed a devotion to their students. In addition to expressing a "...love for their students and their desire to work with them, the teachers interviewed for the study were also influenced by the sense of professional and person fulfillment they experienced from their work" (p. 818). The teachers also expressed feeling supported by their colleagues and site administrators.

In her book *What Keeps Teachers Going* (2003), Nieto provides evidence for the idea that teaching has many complex dimensions, some of them challenging and unpleasant, but it is ultimately the "emotional stuff," love, anger, desperation, hope and possibility, that keeps teachers in the profession (p. 122). This devotion to the emotional stuff is due to a strong sense of vocation, or "a sense of mission" that teachers who

remain in the profession seem to express (Nieto, 2005, p. 204) Nieto also proposes that professional development for teachers needs to shift from the “what” and “how” of teaching to the “why” of teaching through ongoing personal reflection and discourse.

### **Summary**

To summarize, this literature review covers the intersection between mindfulness and issues found in the K-12 teaching profession. Mindfulness is a personal construct. It can be experienced and practiced in a variety of ways. It can be a formal or informal practice. Despite the various conceptions and definitions of mindfulness, it is generally regarded as attending to thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and sensory experiences as they arise moment to moment, without judgment. The research from the neuroscientific, medical, and psychological research provides accumulating evidence that individuals can benefit personally and professionally from practicing mindfulness (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 3).

When examining the research of key issues affecting K-12 teachers, it reveals teachers report experiencing moderate to high levels of stress, and the strongest association of teacher stressors exists with negatively oriented emotional responses confirming the central role of teachers' coping mechanisms, personality mediators, and burnout potential (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). The effects of teacher stress and burnout are well documented in the research literature but very little is offered in professional development to help teachers cope with stress and fend off burnout. This may be problematic considering, “A teacher’s coping skills will determine how successful he or she will be in managing stress” (Larrivee, 2012, p. 4).

Throughout the studies reviewed in this chapter on teachers who remain in the profession, a sense of care for the students and having a network of support were common threads among the teachers in the studies. The teachers also exhibited teacher-efficacy. Meaning, despite encountering challenging times with students and bureaucratic demands, they were able to move through those challenging moments, thus limiting the negative emotions that could possibly result in burnout.

When reviewing the research literature on mindfulness and teachers, it appears mindfulness practices can nurture teachers' inner resilience by providing them with the skills they need to be aware of their emotions and some tools, such as meditating and mindful breathing, for coping when they feel overwhelmed by their emotions. The research on mindfulness and teachers provides a glimpse of a possible intervention for providing teachers with some skills that may help them face the demands of teaching, thus helping them develop resiliency in times of stress and fend off burnout.

However the teachers' stories and voices are missing from the research literature on mindfulness in education. We know very little about the day-to-day experiences of teachers who attempt to practice mindfulness in their classrooms. Additionally, the majority of the research on teachers and mindfulness is about teachers who participated in a mindfulness training program. What about teachers who have developed their own mindfulness practices? How does one's personal practices affect his or her teaching experiences? In this study, I hope to add teachers' voices to the research literature on what it means to be a mindfulness practitioner in the classroom.



## **CHAPTER THREE**

### **Methodology**

The purpose of this study is to explore the experiences of teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners. This chapter explains the research design, data collection, and data analysis for this qualitative study. The chapter is concluded with a discussion of my personal perspective and relationship to the phenomena of mindfulness and teaching.

### **The Case for a Qualitative Study**

Most of the published literature on mindfulness practices and K-12 teachers employ the use of survey tools, such as the Perceived Stress Scale and the Mindfulness Attention Awareness Scale (i.e. Frank et al., 2013; Gold et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2011; Lantieri et al., 2011), to gather data on the teachers' perceptions of their well-being pre and post mindfulness training. In a study by Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, and Davidson (2013), the researchers actually measured the teacher-participants' cortisol levels throughout the study to ascertain their psychological stress levels (p. 186).

These quantitative tools are useful methods for gathering data on large groups of people, yet they do not include the teacher-participants' lived experiences. In order to attempt to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them, qualitative studies are best (Deznin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 4). Furthermore, Christopher and Maris (2010) argue for the use of qualitative research when studying mindfulness because it offers us the potential to explore participants' experiences in an open-ended manner that quantitative research has not yet captured. Therefore, I chose a qualitative approach for this study.

## **Rationale for Phenomenology**

The available published research on mindfulness and K-12 teachers includes a few mixed-method (Flook et al., 2013; Jennings, 2014; Singh et al., 2013) and qualitative studies (Napoli, 2004; Solloway, 2000), but I found the understandings gained from such studies to be limited due to the lack of the teacher-participants' presence in the literature. Given this, I believe phenomenology is an appropriate theoretical lens for exploring and describing the phenomena of teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners. Considering mindfulness is an experiential phenomenon and mindfulness practices are a part of a person's experiences, such as their thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations, it is important to ask about people's experiences (Allen, Bromley, Kuyken, & Sonnentag, 2009, p. 414). Phenomenological inquiry can lead us to a description of human experience as it is experienced by the person him or herself (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 96). Furthermore, "Phenomenology seeks to make explicit the implicit structure and meaning of human experiences. It is the search for 'essences' that cannot be revealed by ordinary observation" (Sanders, 1982). A phenomenological approach allowed me to investigate the underlying experiences of what it is like to be a teacher who practices mindfulness.

In order to avoid what Ball (1993) calls "present absence," where teachers become 'resources' - a means to the ends (p. 117), I chose to conduct in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviews for this study. Teachers may be at the center of discussion in the research on mindfulness and education, "... yet their voices, stories, and understandings are suspiciously missing (Andrelchik, 2014, p. 161). When a researcher's goal is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience,

interviewing provides a necessary avenue of inquiry (Seidman, 2006, p. 11). In-depth phenomenological-based interviews “combine life-history interviewing (see Bertaux, 1981) and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology” (Seidman, 2006, p. 15).

A phenomenological approach to inquiry allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of my participants’ experiences with mindfulness and their work as teachers in a K-12 classroom. It is important to note that, “Phenomenology does not offer us the possibility of effective theory with which we can now explain and/or control the world, but rather it offers us the possibility of plausible insights that bring us in more direct contact with the world” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 9). I do recognize, “No single method can grasp all the subtle variations in ongoing human experience” (Deznin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 29). However by conducting in-depth, phenomenologically based interviews, I believe I was able to gain a deeper understanding of the participants’ lived experiences and the meaning they make of those experiences (Seidman, 2006, p. 9).

### **Overview of the Research Design**

Based upon my desire to gain a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners, I modeled the in-depth interviews after Dolbeare and Schuman’s (Schuman, 1982) series of three interviews that allow the interviewer and participant to plumb the experience and to place it in context:

The first interview establishes the context of the participants’ experience. The second allows participants to reconstruct the details of their experience within the context in which it occurs. And the third encourages the participants to reflect on the meaning their experience holds for them (Seidman, 2006, p. 17).

The following open-ended interview questions guided the semi-structured interviews:

**Interview One (participant's history):**

How did the participant come to be a mindfulness practitioner?

How did the participant come to be a teacher?

**Interview Two (participant's contemporary experience):**

What is it like for the participant to be a teacher who is a mindfulness practitioner?

What are the details of the participant's classroom experiences as a mindfulness practitioner in the classroom?

**Interview Three (participant's reflection on meaning):**

What does it mean to be a mindfulness practitioner?

What does it mean to be a teacher?

How does the participant make sense of his/her work in the classroom as a mindfulness practitioner?<sup>2</sup>

The questions in the participants' history portion of the interview were chosen because I wanted to put the participants' experiences in context by asking them as much as possible about their experiences according to the topics (Seidman, 2006, p.17), in this case, the participants' history of becoming a mindfulness practitioner and a teacher. This was essential because, unlike most of the published research on teachers and mindfulness, I was not interviewing participants who completed a mindfulness training program. Each of the participants came to the study with his or her own personal mindfulness practices and conception of mindfulness. By asking the participants to conceptualize what they believe mindfulness practices are, I attempted to honor the participants' perspectives on mindfulness since mindfulness is believed to be a personal construct of experiences (Allen, Bromley, Kuyken, & Sonnenberg, 2009, p. 414). In accordance with Bentz and Shapiro's (1998) mindful inquiry, I was seeking "... not only to discover or record what

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from p. 34. Seidman, I. (2006). *Interviewing as qualitative research: A guide for researchers in education and the social sciences*. New York: Teachers College Press.

is there, but to allow what is there to manifest itself in a new way, to come forward” thus allowing the opportunity for creating new meanings (p. 54). Additionally since the intersection of mindfulness and teaching is explored in this study, I chose to inquire about the participants’ history of choosing K-12 teaching as a career. These life history questions allowed me to build a back-story for each participant.

The second set of interview questions, those that focus on the participants’ contemporary experiences, were designed to allow the participants to reconstruct the details of their present lived experiences. Seidman (2006) advises not to ask participants’ opinions, but ask for the details of their experiences in which their opinions may be built (p. 18). In this second set of interview questions, the task, however incompletely it may turn out, is to reconstruct the details of the participants’ experiences of being a K-12 teacher and mindfulness practitioner (p. 18).

The final set of interview questions, those that address the participants’ reflection on meaning, are designed to address the intellectual and emotional connections between the participants’ work and life (Seidman, 2006, p. 18). Even though this final set of questions explicitly focuses on the participants’ understanding of mindfulness, teaching, and the intersection of being a mindfulness practitioner in the classroom, it is actually throughout all three interviews the participants construct meaning. According to Vygotsky (1987), the very process of putting experiences into language is a meaning-making process (Seidman, 2006, p. 19). The design and application of these interview questions allowed me to craft an understanding of the participants’ lived experiences as mindfulness practitioners and K-12 teachers.

## **Data Collection**

Semi-structured interviews from four K-12 teachers who self-identified as mindfulness practitioners provided the data for this study. Finding participants was one of the greatest challenges in executing this study. Teachers are very busy, and I was requesting 60 – 90 minutes of their time a week for three weeks. Additionally, I was looking for teachers who self-identified as mindfulness practitioners, a unique sub-group of teachers. However, Sanders (1982) and Seidman (2006) maintain that quantity should not be confused with quality. “Researchers in the phenomenological mode attempt to understand the meaning of events and interactions to ordinary people in particular situations” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 23). I believe through the in-depth interviews with the four participants I was able to develop a better understanding the phenomena of being a teacher who is also a mindfulness practitioner.

Once I received Institutional Review Board Approval (IRB) to begin this study (See Appendix A), I began reaching out to teachers who I thought might be willing to participate or who may know someone who is a teacher and a mindfulness practitioner. I also conducted a pilot test of the interview questions with a high school English teacher. This teacher did not self-identify himself as a mindfulness practitioner, but he did consider himself to be a mindful person. This pilot interview was helpful because I was able to reflect upon the appropriateness of the design of the research structure, my role as an interviewer (Seidman, 2006, p. 39) and to understand the need for purposeful sampling. Because the pilot participant was not a mindfulness practitioner, he had difficulty explaining what mindfulness is, and he often used the word “mindful” when attempting to describe what mindfulness means to him. I realized that recruiting teachers

who self-identified as mindfulness practitioners would be the key to getting information rich interviews. This interview pilot helped to confirm that purposeful sampling is necessary for participants to appropriately convey their experiences and provide a wealth of information for my research question (Creswell, 1998).

In response to the emails I sent out to the teachers I knew, one teacher who was an acquaintance emailed me back agreeing to participate. We met over the course of three weeks during the summer at a coffee shop for the interviews. When I did not hear back from others, I posted an email about my study to the Mindfulness in Education Network (MIEN) email group. Two participants responded to that posting. Because these two participants were out of state, I conducted their interviews over Skype. "Skype as a research medium can allow the researcher to reap the well-documented benefits of traditional face-to-face interviews in qualitative research, while also benefiting from the aspects Holt (2010) suggests telephone interviews bring to such research" (Hanna, 2012, p. 239). I contacted the participants on their cell phones via my Skype account, so no video was used. This allowed me to audio record the interviews off the speakers on my computer.

In my attempt to find more participants for this study, I had flyers made by a printing company. Two principals agreed to let me post these flyers in their staff lounge at their schools, and one yoga studio agreed to post my flyer. I also reached out to two mindfulness groups on Facebook asking if they would post my request for participants. One group agreed to do so. Unfortunately, I did not get any participants from any of these efforts.

Three and a half months passed between my last participant interview before I was able to find another teacher willing to participate in this study. All the participants, with the exception of the last one, participated in the three-round interview process. For the three participants who participated in three-set interviews, those rounds were spaced about a week apart from one another. This is ideal, according to Seidman (2006), because each interview in the series provides a foundation of the participant's experience in relation to the phenomenon (p. 21). Unfortunately due to the last participant's schedule, we were not able to complete the interview in three rounds as I did with the others. Seidman does advise, as long as the participants are able to reconstruct and reflect upon their experiences within their lives, alterations in the three-part interview structure can be explored (p.21). "...[T]here are no absolutes in the world of interviewing" (p. 22). Therefore due to the difficulty in finding participants, I decided to go forward with the interview without using the three-interview structure. We covered her history, contemporary experiences, and reflections on meaning in one interview session. Since the participant lived out of state, this interview was also conducted over Skype.

Upon receiving verbal consent from each of the participants, I used a digital voice recorder to record our conversations. I took only minimal notes in my journal during the interviews, so I could focus on creating a comfortable conversation with the participants and guide the conversation (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992). Upon meeting for the next interview round, either in person or over the Skype call, I always asked the participants if there was anything they thought of after our last conversation that they would like to add or address. This gave them the opportunity to add something they may have forgotten or to clarify something from the previous interview. Sometimes they would reply, "No, not



that I can think of,” and other times they would begin with something that came to mind from our last conversation. I believe it was important to provide the opportunity for the participants to add or amend their reconstructions of their experiences since phenomenological reflection is retrospective (Van Manen, 1990, p.10).

Each of the three interviews conducted in the three-part manner lasted approximately 60 – 90 minutes. The last participant’s total interview lasted about 90 minutes. The interviews were transcribed by a professional transcription service. To ensure accuracy, I printed the transcripts, and listened to the interviews while following along with the transcription to ensure accuracy.

### **Data Analysis**

When it was time to code the data, I relied upon Saldaña’s *The Coding Manual For Qualitative Researchers* (2013) for guidance. The data was coded simultaneously using In Vivo and values coding. In Vivo coding, also known as literal or verbatim coding, uses the words or phrases used by the participants. I chose In Vivo coding because Saldaña advises its appropriateness for virtually all qualitative studies, particularly for those beginning qualitative researchers, and for studies that aim to prioritize and honor the participants’ voices (p. 91). “Values coding is the application of codes onto qualitative data that reflect a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspective or worldview” (p. 110). Saldaña advises that values coding is appropriate for virtually all qualitative studies, but particularly helpful for those studies that explore participants’ intra and interpersonal experiences. Since this study is an exploration of teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners and their classroom experiences, I believe this was an appropriate application to uncover the

participants' personal meanings, evaluative concepts or beliefs, and/or the values they attach to those meanings and beliefs (p. 111).

I began coding the first set of interview questions, the participants' history, with values coding. As I read each transcript, I looked for specific responses to interview questions. Once I found a response, I marked the passage on the transcript, and identified in the margin next to the passage whether the response was a value, attitude or belief. I included key words or phrases the participant used to express that value, attitude, or belief. For example, in this excerpt from a transcript I asked a participant, "What does being a mindfulness practitioner mean to you?" The participant replied, "It means I strive to be reflective about everything I do so that everything I do is toward some intentional aim." In the margin of the transcript, I wrote "A (for attitude): strive to be reflective, intentional aim."

After completing this with each participant's responses about his or her history, I then created a three-column table by hand and sorted the participant's values, attitudes, and beliefs in response to the first set of interview questions using key words and phrases from the transcripts that represented the value, attitude, or belief expressed. Upon Saldaña's (2013) advice, I paid close attention to "evocative word choices, clever or ironic phrases, similes and metaphors, etc." (p. 92). I completed this process for each round of interviews.

Leary and Tate (2007) explain, "...mindfulness is a multifaceted construct whose components are often difficult to disentangle" (p. 251). I found this to be quite true when attempting to sort the data. It was challenging at times to create a composite description that captured the essence of the participants' experiences and constructions of meanings.

For example, when explaining “what it is like to be a teacher who is also a mindfulness practitioner?,” participants would also include ideas of what it means to be a mindfulness practitioner in general. The three-column organizer I created allowed me to sort the data into manageable categories: the participants’ history, contemporary experiences, and reflections upon meaning into a manageable format. Appendix B contains an example of one of these three-column tables I created.

Analyzing the data was an ongoing process. Saldaña (2013) points out according to Boyatzis (1998) a theme may be at the manifest level (directly observable in the information) or at the latent level (underlying the phenomenon) (p. 175). I chose to approach theming at the latent level because it serves phenomenology’s attempt to get at a deeper understanding of the nature or meaning of everyday experiences (p. 176). The three-column organizers I created for the data allowed me to manage the data I coded on the participants’ values, attitudes, and beliefs in relation to the portion of the interview stage (history, contemporary experiences, and reflection on meaning). Having these organized helped me read through the data looking to uncover how various themes are similar, how they are different, and what relationships exist between them (Gibson & Brown, 2009, pp. 128-129, as cited in Saldaña, 2013, p. 178). Upon reading and re-reading these organizers, I began to creating categories such as, “mindfulness means...” and “being a teacher means...” that I felt represented the data on a latent level.

Before deciding upon the themes, I crafted a narrative profile for each participant. The profile, I believe, is a crucial element to this study because it allowed me to transform what I have learned about the participants into a brief story (Mishler, 1986, as cited in Seidman, 2006, p. 120). Additionally, profiles can be a “...way to find and

display coherence in the constitutive events of a participant's experience, to share the coherence the participant has expressed, and to link the individual's experience to the social and organization context within which he or she operates" (Seidman, p. 120).

Next, I spent a good portion of my time in the incubation and illumination (Moustakas, 1990) period crafting thematic categories. Inspired by Bentz and Shapiro's *Mindfulness Inquiry in Social Research* (MI) (1998), I tried to approach this process through a spiral. I found the metaphor of a spiral helpful for trying to work through the creation of thematic categories. Bentz and Shapiro explain, "We visualize the journey of the research process as a spiral to emphasize the sense of expansion and forward motion that comes from circling in time and touching various points [of the research experience]. (p. 43). Moving around the spiral the researcher connects to the research related to the study, to the methodological literature, and the theoretical literature to expand one's personal reflections and interpretation of the topic being studied. With each turn of the spiral, the researcher creates a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and of him or herself (p. 43). After creating a thematic category, I viewed each reconstruction as a turn towards a deeper understanding of the phenomenon and myself as a reflective inquirer. For example, one of the first themes that arose in the data was centered on how the teachers spoke about the demands of teaching and how they coped with those demands. It sounded to me as if they expressed the quality of equanimity<sup>3</sup>. I explored the research on equanimity as one of the turns in the research process. However after reviewing the literature on equanimity, I found this was not a satisfactory thematic category. After two

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<sup>3</sup> Equanimity typically refers to one's capacity to "see the silver lining" during difficult or trying times (Astin & Keen, 2006, p. 2).

months and several drafts, I was finally able to concisely describe this thematic category in relation to what the participants expressed in their interviews.

Bentz and Shapiro (1998) advise taking hermeneutic turns on the spiral asking the researcher to look at his or her levels of preexisting interpretations that may be present (p. 51), and thus, reminding us that everything we experience is interpreted through our existing filters (p. 40). Taking hermeneutic turns on the spiral, I not only returned to the transcripts, I also re-examined the literature on mindfulness comparing what has been written by others to the participants' lived experiences. I also considered what something means depends upon the cultural context in which it was generated as well as within the context in which it was interpreted (Patton, 2002, p. 113), so I had to consider how my theoretical perspective was influencing the creation of the themes. This required lots of revising. Creating analytic memos was most helpful during this exploration. Analytic memos, according to Saldaña (2013), are somewhat comparable to researcher journal entries. Analytic memos are "a place to 'dump your brain' about the participants, phenomenon, [and] process under investigation (p. 41). See Appendix 3 for some examples of the analytic memos I created.

In the final stages of this heuristic process of phenomenological inquiry, I worked on explicating and creatively synthesizing (Moustakas, 1990) the themes I found within the participants' interviews. Throughout this stage I extracted excerpts from the interviews that I felt were most salient of each thematic category. After multiple drafts and experimentation with language in order to provide a coherent description of the themes, I settled on the analytic framework. The analytical framework I built begins with the participants' history with mindfulness and coming into the K-12 teaching profession,

their professional experiences, their experiences with the students and their experience with others in their school.

### **Personal Perspective**

Because an individual with a life and a lifeworld always carries out research, that person, the researcher, is always at the center of the process of inquiry (Bentz & Shapiro, 1998, p. 4). Creswell (2007) advises that the researcher should decide how and in what ways his or her own personal understandings and experiences should be introduced into the study. Given that the basis of phenomenology, as a procedure, is the belief that when people ask certain questions, they do so burdened with the mental baggage of assumptions (Sanders, 1982, p. 355), I believe it is important at this point in the study to convey my own professional experiences and explanation of mindfulness before moving onto the next chapter. This is what Patton (2002) and Douglass and Moustakas (1984) refer to as the Epoche, where the researcher looks inside him or herself to reflect upon biases and personal involvement with the topic at hand. I decided to add my perspectives here and not to Chapters Four and Five because I attempted to amplify the participants' voices in those chapters.

This is a deeply personal research endeavor. I am a former secondary teacher and a current mindfulness practitioner. A great deal of this study was designed around my own self-interests - to know more about the intersection of mindfulness and K-12 teaching. While working on this study, I worked as a teacher educator for a university and as a manager for first and second year teachers at Teach For America. I have worked for both a traditional teacher preparation program and a non-traditional teacher preparation program. What I observed on both sides worries me. I designed and executed

this study because I believe we are not preparing people to deal with the social and emotional demands of teaching.

For the past five years, most of my job has consisted of observing and coaching pre-service and in-service teachers. This means I to travel to schools around the Phoenix valley. Visiting a variety of campuses, I encounter teachers who resent their students for their misbehavior. I have heard teachers speak with such vitriol to students that I recoil pondering the shame the students must be experiencing. I encounter teachers who are doing the bare minimum to get by, and teachers who are so burdened by external demands they no longer have the time and energy to plan lessons they believe are developmentally appropriate and relevant for their students. In my opinion, something is happening in our schools. I often observe experiences that are not pleasant for the teachers or the students. As a researcher and former secondary teacher, I know how stressful teaching can be. That is why I no longer teach in a secondary setting.

I left the K-12 teaching profession due to burnout. Although, I did not know it was burnout at the time; I just knew I was tired of teaching. The students became more of a challenge than a pleasure to work with. In my years as a K-12 teacher, never once was our mental health discussed in our professional development or staff meetings. I am not sure what drove me to experience burnout first: the shift for standardized achievement and the loss of creativity and autonomy or my perception of the students and what I perceived as their exceeding social and emotional needs.

As pointed out in the introduction to this study, so much of the students' classroom experience depends upon the teacher. Knowing the research on teacher stress and having experienced burnout myself, I cannot help but wonder if teaching is a

sustainable career. The last thing I want to do as a teacher educator is gloss over the emotional and physical demands that come along with being a teacher, but I do not want to scare my students away from the classroom either. After all, they may be more resilient than I.

As someone who has practiced yoga for nearly twenty years and has become a regular meditator within the past five years, of course, I found the mindfulness in education movement to be fascinating. It never occurred to me when I was a teacher to bring some of my mindfulness practices into my classroom. I cannot help wonder if I had, would I still be teaching in a K-12 setting? Since I have become more diligent about practicing mindfulness, I feel that I handle challenging situations more calmly than I did before, and I find I am more accepting of people. Also, I do not have the amount of anxiety I used to experience.

However, the realities of a K-12 classroom contrast sharply, in my opinion, to those of a college classroom, where I now teach. Although I can feel stressed from my work, it is never the type of stress I experienced when I was teaching five classes a day, managing over one hundred and fifty adolescents, five days a week. I entered this research experience with mixed feelings of hope and skepticism. This is where I believe the Buddhist turns from *Mindful Inquiry in Social Research* (1998) helped. The Buddhist turns require the researcher to become aware of his or her personal needs with regard to inquiry. These turns are about overcoming illusions, the false separations between our participants and ourselves and how we identify or define “other” (p. 38). Bentz and Shapiro caution that we need to be mindful of the way we experience the “other,” in this case the participants. We may be projecting illusions, fantasies, needs, or emotions (p.



52). Adhering to the Buddhist turns was a crucial process for giving up my immediate impulse to have things be the way I want them to be and guide me towards what I consider genuine inquiry (p. 53).

Throughout this study, I used reflexive journaling and engaged in lots of conversations with others about my participants and the data. These actions were my attempt to present the participants' experiences without the influence of my negative experiences as a K-12 teacher or the glossing over of their experiences in an attempt to frame mindfulness practices as the answer to saving the teaching profession. This study represents my effort to present the participants' experiences in compelling enough detail and in sufficient depth so that those who read it can connect to participants' experiences as mindfulness practitioners and K-12 teachers and deepen their understandings of the phenomena of mindfulness practitioners in the classroom.

### **Summary**

This qualitative study was designed to explore the lived experiences of teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners. I collected data through in-depth, phenomenologically-based interviews with four K-12 teachers. Phenomenological analysis of the data involved the process of constructing and deconstructing thematic categories. My representation of the participants' lived experiences as mindfulness practitioners and K-12 teachers are presented in the chapter that follows. By asking participants to conceptualize their experiences, I recognize that I am asking them to describe, and I am relying on myself to construct, a reality that can never be fully apprehended, only approximated (Guba, 1990, p. 22, as cited in Deznin & Lincoln, 2008,

p. 14). Therefore, my analysis and findings should be read as partial and tentative as well as historically positioned.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### Findings

The grand tour question (Cresswell, 2007) for this study was, “How do teachers who self-identify as mindfulness practitioners conceptualize their classroom experiences?” After analyzing the data, I identified four main themes that were common in each of the four teachers’ in-depth interviews, thus creating a conceptualization of their classroom experiences. The main themes that emerged from the data were:

1. The participants expressed the belief that mindfulness practices helped them cope with the demands of teaching.
2. The participants emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships.
3. The participants spoke of teaching as an act of caring.
4. As a result of being a mindfulness practitioner, the participants expressed a sense of isolation among their colleagues.

This chapter starts with a short introduction of key guiding concepts and the description of the participants. Afterwards, I present each of those four themes along with the participants’ personal, storied perspectives (Deznin & Lincoln, 2008, p. 16) related to each of the key themes. I conclude the chapter with a summary of the findings.

### **What is a Mindfulness Practitioner?**

For this study, I interviewed four K-12 teachers who self-identified as mindfulness practitioners. For the purposes of presenting the data and findings in a comprehensive way, I will briefly remind the reader of my working definition of mindfulness. Utilizing Kabat-Zinn’s (1994/2005) concept, “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally”

(p.4). Whether measured as a trait, considered an induced temporary state, or developed as the result of extensive training, mindfulness is related to emotion, thought, and psychological well-being (Brown, Ryan & Cresswell, 2007). Just as it is necessary for us to remain physically active if we want to stay physically fit, mindfulness needs to be cultivated through continuous practice (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/1991/2005). The practice component in mindfulness is the reason for describing the participants in this study as “practitioners.” In regards to their practice, each of the four teachers I interviewed said they meditate several times a week and two of the teachers also practice and teach yoga. Here it is also useful to remind the reader “... that mindfulness is a multifaceted construct whose components are often difficult to disentangle” (Leary & Tate, 2007, p. 251). As I coded for themes among the participants’ interviews, I encountered difficulty in trying to disentangle the themes because many of them lead into or are connected to others.

### **Participant Profiles**

The participants for this study include four K-12 teachers who self-identified as mindfulness practitioners. Two are novice teachers, and two are veteran teachers. All participants except one selected a pseudonym for their profiles.

**Nora.** Nora is a white, thirty-six-year-old elementary and special education teacher. She has taught for a total of fifteen years and has been a mindfulness practitioner for over ten years. She is also a certified yoga instructor. She is the only participant in this study that I had the opportunity to interview in person.

***Nora and Mindfulness.*** Nora credits her father and her older brothers for introducing her to mindfulness. Nora’s father’s parents were both legally deaf, and she thinks this may have contributed to her father being “...a person who’s just extra aware

of his environment...” Her father liked to spend time outside, and according to Nora, “He’s more [of] a spiritual guy.” He always encouraged Nora and her siblings to spend time outside, “...[to] find peace with nature.” Nora learned from an early age that she felt more peaceful outdoors, where things were quiet. One of her brothers began practicing martial arts and another began practicing transcendental meditation, both contemplative activities that utilize mindfulness practices, thus introducing Nora to the idea of mindfulness practices. When speaking of her brothers and father, Nora said, “They taught me a lot about meditating and the value that it had within a day or centering yourself, and I dabbled in that, but only dabbled. It didn't [yet] become a daily part of my life.” It was actually when one of her favorite bands The Beastie Boys developed an interest in Buddhism that Nora became more interested as well and began to explore Buddhism and meditation further. Nora recalled,

From that, I read more about Buddhism. I was going to school [on the East Coast], so there was an opportunity to practice at the monastery, [to] practice meditation, so I still got a little bit more into that, and then really started trying to practice it within my life. Not all the time, I didn't have a formal practice, but just when journaling or different moments when I'd get lost in my thoughts, I'd think, “Okay, wait. Center yourself and just be aware of what's happening around you.”

Nora was attracted to mindfulness because she describes herself as, “... a person who tends to have a lot of things going on in my mind at once.” She thought, “Probably I would've been diagnosed with ADD as a child. I have—I'm always thinking of like four different things.” Nora believes that practicing mindfulness helps her cope with her

racing mind. When she is mindful, Nora explains that she is able to focus and accomplish more. She can also become more in tune with her body and emotions, a helpful skill for someone who feels that she can easily be affected by others' emotions.

Nora credits her yoga practice for helping her learn how to be more mindful of her thoughts and experiences. Going through certification to become a yoga instructor helped Nora expand her mindfulness practices. She approached her yoga practice with the same attitude that we bring to meditation – to practice accepting one's body as it is in the present moment (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/1991/2005, p. 96). After learning to use mindfulness in yoga, she began to think more about how she could transfer her mindfulness practices to her experiences outside of the yoga studio.

When asked to explain what mindfulness means to her, Nora framed it in relation to her desire to be focused and to be in touch with how she is feeling physiologically. For a person that feels like she always has a lot going on in her mind, mindfulness practices help Nora feel as if she can be more focused. Nora does talk fast, and she uses her hands a lot when she is talking. At times during her interviews, Nora jumped from topic to topic, and I had some difficulty keeping up with follow up questions. There were moments during her interviews when I understood how Nora could feel that she has a racing mind.

As a person in her late thirties, Nora believes that it took all that she has gone through in her life to get to this point where she sees and appreciates the benefits of practicing mindfulness on a regular basis:

...it's when I'm not practicing mindfulness that I get lost in the storm...I wouldn't be here now had I not gone through the experiences I've had, where I was so

grasping on straws that were not great for me to grasp on. I wouldn't be here practicing mindfulness had I not fallen or really had some tough times where I had to realize, "Wow. Wait. You're so disconnected from yourself."

To avoid getting "lost in the storm," Nora believes it is important to be connected to her thoughts, feelings, and how her body is physically feeling. This is part of her idea of being mindful. According to Nora, if we are not mindful we end up going through just "the motions" of life. To explain this, Nora gave an example of visiting with her parents, whom she deeply loves and admires. She says that she reminds herself to be mindful, so she can stay in the moment with her parents, to really feel their company and to really listen to what they are saying, and not get swept up in the distractions from the television or the snacks on the table. For Nora, practicing mindfulness, being aware of her thoughts, helps her have a more meaningful life and relationships:

I think that it's always when I come back to, "Okay, wait. What is my purpose? What is my goal?" that I become cognizant of my situation. I think that in order to live a whole life where you are having meaning in your days rather than just going through the motions, you need to be mindful. You need to be aware.

Otherwise, it's just you're not living each day to the fullest.

Mindfulness, according to Nora, is a cognitive tool for helping her focus and, therefore, to be more present and live in the moment.

***Nora and Teaching.*** Nora did not intend to be a teacher when she began college as an undergraduate. She started out as a writing major; she said she always "did well in writing." Nora laughed as she said she realized, "...nobody's gonna publish my journal, my diary...so, during that time I went to a psychology class." She loved the class, so she

switched her major to psychology. Incidentally, the psychology department was located in the college of education, so she decided to work towards her certification. Nora recalled,

Yeah, so I remember, it wasn't until I started doing the sort of student teaching or observations that I realized...I've always been a camp counselor and I loved reading books to kids, and so I thought, "Wow, this is great." It really helped me stand into my own shoes or really feel empowered. Teaching, to me, is great because you are able to say, "Hey, listen. I'm here to help you..."

As the youngest in a family with six children where she has "always been somebody's baby," Nora felt when she became a teacher that she was finally able to be taken seriously and to help others, as opposed to the one receiving the help.

After teaching for fourteen years, Nora took a year off for personal and professional reasons. She said that teaching to the prescribed curriculum at her previous school "was really creatively stifling" and she had some students with serious behavioral issues that she had never encountered before. When she spoke of those behavioral issues, Nora said "... [it] would derail me. I would get very derailed and really caught up in the experience." Also during this time Nora broke up with her boyfriend of three years. She said, "I had an incredibly trying end to my relationship where I thought, 'This is marriage...' this was happening at one time." Nora was stressed, and she was not keeping up with her yoga and meditation practice. Nora disclosed, "I went to my doctor to talk about it, and they just immediately prescribed anti-anxiety medication...[my] hair was falling out. I would be sitting in the shower just like, 'Ugh, what am I doing with my life?'" It was Nora's father who intervened. He was concerned because she had never



been on medication before, and he encouraged Nora to get back to her mindfulness practices. When she spoke of her year off from teaching, Nora explained,

It was a really good year because I rebalanced myself and I really realized that mindfulness is not something that you practice in a yoga class and then come home and get in your car, it's the whole day, everything—brushing your teeth. It wasn't until I went through all those experiences that I came to that point.

Again, Nora credits her life experiences and hitting this low in her personal and professional life for her commitment to mindfulness. After her year off from teaching, Nora decided that she could return back to the classroom, but this time she was determined to bring her mindfulness practices with her.

I asked Nora what it means to be a teacher. She told a story about a former student to frame her perspective on what it means to her:

I had one student once who was really headed on a violent path. I don't know where he went. I'll never know. He took off one day, an older child. I remember thinking—I spoke to my dad about it, "Oh, I'm sad about it." It's in permanence. That's life. You'll never know when you'll see another person again. My dad said, "You could be—maybe that person's gonna do a crime in ten years, but maybe right before it happens he remembers, 'Wow, wait a second. Somebody believed in me,' or 'Somebody was patient with me.'" I think that's why I do this, because people endure really horrific situations in their lives and they need to know that there are people out there that will support them.

Nora views teaching as a mission. She elaborated, "...truly my mission is to help people that I interact with, that I teach, really feel accepted and really feel vulnerable to embrace

their unique potential.” Nora further added that this is why she chooses to teach in a low-income community and how she feels that working with her student population allows her to fulfill this mission.

When asked to explain what it means to be a *mindful teacher*, Nora relayed that it means she tries “...to be aware of every of every moment...” in the classroom. For her being mindful in the classroom means that she reflects upon what she is doing. It also means that she stops to be aware of her emotions, so she does not let her stress or her mood affect her students. Additionally, being a mindful teacher for Nora means that she is creating moments to be more aware of how her students are feeling as well in her classroom. Nora acknowledges, “...if you really want to practice mindfulness, you really have to be intentional about it.” Given her tendency to become distracted, Nora believes that being mindful in the classroom helps her be a better teacher.

At the time of her interview, Nora was teaching first grade English language learners at a charter school in a low-income community in the Southwest.

**Josh.** Josh is a white, thirty-six year-old, elementary teacher. Josh came to participate in my study after a friend of his forwarded him my posting on MiEN. Because Josh lives on the East Coast, his interviews were conducted over the phone. Josh has been meditating for thirteen years.

***Josh and mindfulness.*** Josh said in order for me to understand how he became a mindfulness practitioner he needed to go back to the tenth grade. His teen years were marked by a life changing experience. Josh shared a personal story about his first experience with depression:

I had an older brother and I based all my interests and everything I wanted to do on what he liked to do. Then he went away to college when I was in tenth grade, and at that point I had somewhat of a crisis in my life, just in the fact that, for the first time in my life I didn't have to do what he liked. I kinda tell myself that it was being able to choose some other things. What happened was I actually got very depressed because everything that I thought mattered before then all the sudden didn't seem to matter. I had to figure out what did matter. At the time, the only things I could find that mattered, that I really cared about were music. Actually, music primarily and poetry, and so I was really involved with those. I was depressed and actually got on depression medication. I went to college and I continued on that and then those relating to music, but not really happy with much of anything else.

Although he was not practicing mindfulness at the time, Josh's struggle with depression is what ultimately led him to yoga and meditation. Josh said he was depressed throughout college and tried several times to get off of the anti-depressant medication, but he was never successful. In his interview Josh expressed shame about taking medication, "...I hated the fact that I was on medication. I hated the fact that I had depression and I wouldn't talk to anyone about it. I would hide it. I was very ashamed..."

While attending college, Josh began working with a professor "... who was very heavily into service work," and this inspired him to work with "... kids at risk of being placed outside their homes." Struggling with his own depression while working with people who were in dire circumstances was challenging for Josh. Josh admits during that

time in his life he was operating in a “a very dualistic place.” He saw a world with “bad people” and thought in order to protect people from the bad people, “You have to do the good.” He thought if he could just continue to do the “good” work that he could help others and protect them from the “bad,” and that to Josh “ ... was kind of fearful.” He figured “ ...you [would] have to work so hard it’ll probably kill you...”

Josh began to notice how his mentor at work approached the challenges of the job, and he began asking her questions. He wanted to know how a person could work with people in such dire circumstances all while maintaining a sense of balance. This woman was direct and loving. She did not see people as “good” or “bad,” as Josh did. And according to Josh, his mentor had a very healthy outlook on life in general. When explaining the impact his mentor had upon him, Josh’s voice softened and he began to speak slowly and thoughtfully when recalling his mentor,

My questions were about how she approached the work and what—how could she have—how could she approach the work from a place with total love? How did that make any sense? How did the world make any sense if that’s what she did? She started answering my questions about how she viewed life and how she—how she had this spiritual foundation. Up to that point in my life everyone like my—my model of the world was that anyone who practiced religion, you know if you asked me at the time I would’ve just said, “They’re stupid.” *[Laughter]*. I didn’t have a sense that anyone could believe in God and be like a much sane, rational human being...

His mentor's ability to approach people "from a place of total love" where nobody was "against anybody" inspired Josh. When speaking about his mentor, Josh recalls her ability to be upfront and direct, but, "It wasn't like fighting it was just being there and being present, and supporting people in just the way it would help them, you know total love—[in a] completely loving way."

This was the model Josh needed. He eventually was able to move out of a dualistic mode of thought, and learned how to create balance in the work he was doing, so he could help others all while keeping himself healthy. Josh learned that he did not need to be a martyr and sacrifice himself to help others:

It created the fundamental ability...to serve the people, but [also to] stay balanced and stay useful...I started to have an understanding of how life could make sense... Everything just started to change, so I started to change the way that I ate. I started to change the way that I exercised. I started to change the way that I talked to my family and I started—everything started to change. I just started to open up to some different things.

Josh was feeling better about himself and life, and he began reading about various spiritual approaches. I asked Josh what was his mentor's spiritual foundation, what was his mentor saying to turn a self-proclaimed agnostic such as himself into a seeker of spiritual growth? Josh chuckled as he explained, "Her scheduled foundation was AA. It's my favorite. I say, you know my—my guru was a, I was 22 at the time; my guru was a 40 year old, over weight, lesbian, alcoholic." His mentor's influence left Josh wanting to know more about how one's spiritual beliefs and practices could contribute to what Josh

perceived as a healthy outlook on life. Because he is not an alcoholic and has no addictions, Josh said he knew he needed to seek his own spiritual path. He clarified that AA was intriguing, but that was not his path.

Josh's mentor also introduced him to yoga. At first he did yoga because it helped his back pain, but then he realized that he enjoyed practicing it, "I started reading more about yoga and doing more yoga." The turning point for Josh and his battle with depression came one day while he was waiting in a doctor's office for one of the families he was working with. He picked up a yoga magazine they had in the lobby. Josh recalled the day he picked up that magazine,

I read it and it said, "If you practice meditation five times a week it's as good as medication at taking away depression." Of course, I—whatever you would have told me at that time to get free of the medication I would've done it. It was such a chore, so shameful. I mean such a source of self-hate, and so I totally committed [*chuckles*]. I'll do meditation that's no problem. Well, I became very committed. I don't think it was just the meditation. I think having a real spiritual foundation was hugely helpful and changing all my lifestyle in that way, but in addition to that adding the meditation and the mindfulness; which you know I—I got—I went to a mindfulness group.

That was thirteen years ago, and Josh said he has not been on medication for depression since. Yoga and meditation are a regular part of his mindfulness practices.

Like Nora, Josh views mindfulness practices as a cognitive tool. However, he added more of a spiritual element throughout his commentary on mindfulness. Perhaps because Josh experienced a dualistic mode of thought before becoming more spiritual and

mindful, he expressed a great concern for using one's mind for creating peace – to not get caught up in the judgments and thoughts about what could happen or has happened. He believes that practicing mindfulness helps him create a sense of peace from within. This was evident when Josh explained what mindfulness means to him:

When I talk about mindfulness, what I'm really focused on is the training of attention, the focus of attention, and the quality of attention; so what we pay attention to and how do we pay attention to that. The idea being that what we pay attention to matters, a great deal, so what we put into our consciousness affects our consciousness. We, obviously, know that. More important than what we pay attention to, more of the training of concentration is to how we pay attention to it. It's this quality of being able to pay attention, with this ability to watch in this way. The words are really difficult, but the best words I can use is it's just this idea of pure enjoyment; this idea to witness what's happening, and just no arguments with anything that's happening; just really being there, allowing it to be what it is, and just seeing it for the miracle that it is. That's how I experience mindfulness, and that's how I teach mindfulness.

For Josh, what we put our attention on matters because it influences how we then view and experience things. For example, in meditation thoughts will naturally arise. We can get flustered or irritated at those thoughts for trying to impede our attempt at mental silence, or we could just recognize we have a thought and then let the thought go. Do not chase the thought; do not label it. Let it go. The training of attention to witness what is happening with no judgment that Josh speaks of has been a key factor for him coping

with his depression. By practicing mindfulness, he learned that his depression is an experience. It does not mean there is anything wrong with him. If he was to focus on the thought that he was flawed, then he would never move beyond recognizing his feelings of sadness. In mindfulness we are taught to be with our thoughts; let them come and go; do not label them. For someone who battles with depression and who can get caught up in binary thoughts, like Josh, this can be a transformative experience.

***Josh and teaching.*** Josh eventually left “service work” to teach meditation and yoga full-time. He did this for six years until he realized that teaching meditation and yoga did not allow him to develop and build the relationships with others that he had desired. According to Josh the decision to become an elementary teacher was easy because he felt he was in a place spiritually and mentally to take on the challenges of the classroom:

I just decided this was the time I wanted to go back [to school]. I thought I had enough of a spiritual base that I could do it with mindfulness; which was the first and most important.

Having a “spiritual base” in which he felt he could be a mindful teacher was crucial for Josh considering his experiences before becoming a mindfulness practitioner. He felt that he had learned a lot about himself and other people. He no longer viewed others as simply “good” or “bad.” His spiritual practices helped him move from a dualistic view of the world to a more loving, compassionate view where he does not have to see people and things as “good” or “bad.”

I asked Josh to explain what being a teacher means to him. At first he explained how teaching is a natural fit for him, considering his interest in helping others and his



skills. He said he sees teaching as a way to have the greatest impact to help the most people. He then elaborated, drawing out his explanation in the context of his second grade students:

Being a teacher just means I get to love kids, all day; perform for kids, which I enjoy doing; support kids; promote the love of learning; promote the joy in learning; promote the joy in discovery; promote the joy in creation of beauty. It's really, there's so much to the job, and all of it can be a real joy. Even writing lesson plans can be a joy. It's just a question of being in that mindset.

I asked Josh to explain what it means to be a teacher who is also a mindfulness practitioner. He framed his explanation around his concept of how we cannot get caught up in what our mind tells us, how we need to look at things without labels:

You can't get lost in thinking you know anything. It's all gotta be completely new and very, very mysterious, and so that's what it means to be a mindful teacher, is that I keep that level of awe and that level of gratitude and that level of reverence...

Josh elucidated that it is not about being a *teacher* who happens to be a *mindfulness practitioner*. He sees mindfulness as a way of being that you take with you wherever you go, "...that it's big enough for anything. No matter what the environment is, that's what you're mindful of. That's where you're supposed to practice mindfulness." This is why he needed to feel like he had enough of a "spiritual base" to be a teacher. He felt he got to the point where he was able to recognize that mindfulness is not something relegated to the meditation cushion.

Josh applied to an alternative teacher certification program where they place to-be teachers in a low-income school. During his first year in the program, Josh co-taught fifth, sixth and third grade. At the time of our interview, he just completed his first solo year teaching second grade at a low-income school on the East Coast. He still teaches yoga and meditation to adults on the weekends. Teaching yoga and meditation allows Josh to maintain a regular practice and work with others on a spiritual level.

**Carlos.** Carlos is a white, twenty-eight-year old, secondary education teacher. He contacted to me in response to a posting I listed on the MIEN email list. Because Carlos lives on the East Coast, we did not have the chance to meet in person, so I conducted his interviews over the phone.

***Carlos and mindfulness.*** When asked how he came to be a mindfulness practitioner, Carlos hesitated, “Well, it’s hard to know how far to go back and what to include...” He then went on to explain that he has always been a person that felt there was more to life than what he saw and experienced at a superficial level. As he was approaching young adulthood, Carlos was overcome by a sense of emptiness and yearned for meaning in his life:

I guess I’ve always been what people would describe as a calm, grounded person. One thing that’s standing out to me is that when I was 17, I think my dad was probably a little concerned about me. He thought I was depressed. He gave me a book and said, “I think you’re ready for this.” The name of the book was *In Search of the Miraculous*. I just, I felt like there was more to life and that people

just weren't seeing everything, weren't seeing something that I was seeing, maybe the pointlessness of always fighting or just the way we go through our lives blindly and not really asking why we do things. I guess that is where I was at.

Carlos describes this time in his life as having "... a typical teenage existential crisis...I felt that there was more to life." He thinks his father gave him a copy of *In Search of the Miraculous* because it addresses "... what might be the purpose of life, why we are here." *In Search of the Miraculous* is "...about the teaching of a spiritual teacher whose last name is Gurdjieff." Gurdjieff believed most people live their lives in a sort of hypnotic state where they are not in tune with their true selves. He believed that it was possible to transcend from that hypnotic state and achieve one's true potential, and he developed a method of discipline called "The Work." This book led Carlos to begin meditating with others who are involved with "The Work." For the next three years, Carlos continued to dabble in other philosophical teachings and meditated sporadically. But it was not until he was twenty-years old, studying abroad, and encountered a medical scare that Carlos became serious about his meditation practice. When remembering that moment in his life, Carlos recalled,

In that moment of feeling like I was gonna die soon, I had this really strong feeling of emptiness and that I needed to do something meaningful before I died. That's when I immediately thought of the Gurdjieff book, and so that was the impetus to go on the Internet and find people. I sent an email...saying that when I came back I wanted to meet with people [to go back to The Work].

Again, that sense of emptiness that plagued him as a teenager overwhelmed him, and Carlos thought the only way to overcome that was to get back to meditating and connecting spiritually with others. According to Carlos, the health scare "...was strange...it very quickly turned out to be nothing," but it did affect him psychologically. Upon returning to the United States, he made the commitment to become a more serious practitioner of mindfulness. Carlos spoke of his continuous "aim" to sit and meditate on his own every morning. Although he said that does not happen every day, he does make it a goal "to be a mindful person."

When asked what being a mindfulness practitioner means to him, Carlos explained,

It means that I strive to be reflective about everything I do, so that everything I do is toward some intentional aim. That aim is very broad, and it's just—personally, it's to grow in as many ways as I can and understand more. More career-wise and socially, the aim is to, I guess, just lessen the suffering of all people. Every time I say that, it sounds like—I don't—it is sincere, but it almost sounds insincere because it's such a—I don't know, but that's really—that's the truth. It's something I've felt for a long time, well, since I can remember.

Like Nora and Josh, Carlos views mindfulness as a cognitive tool. However in contrast to Josh's spiritual approach of mindfulness, Carlos's stance is more aligned with Ellen Langer's (1989) secular and behavioral approach to mindfulness. According to Langer (2002), "When we are mindful, we become sensitive to context and perspective" and we are not trapped in rigid mindsets (p. 279). Carlos believes that if he is constantly evaluating what he is doing and why he is doing it that he can act more purposefully, thus

avoiding the hypnotic state that Gurdjieff warned about. Carlos said his desire is to be a peaceful, nice person. He values the act of reflection, and he believes that practicing mindfulness helps him be more reflective and thus more intentional in his day-to-day experiences and in his relationships. He explained how being mindful helps him think about what he is saying to another person or how he is responding to the other person. This way he can be more aware of what he is thinking "... and nothing malicious ever comes..." about.

Carlos referred back again to his teenage existential crises when asked to explain what being a mindfulness practitioner means to him. This time in his life profoundly impacted him and became the impetus for his desire to help others:

I guess the age of 16 is more or less—that's what I always go back to, that number. About then I realized I just had—I just felt a calling to tell people, knowing that there's so much misery in the world, and that I recognized that I had a pretty easy go growing up. Then I felt like I was a capable person and could do something. I've never really strayed from the mission to help people. I look at mindfulness as, in part, a way to be more effective in that endeavor.

Throughout his reflection upon meaning Carlos spoke of his desire to "lessen people's suffering" and "not be harmful to others." In order to fulfill those desires, Carlos feels that he needs to be aware of what he is thinking and stop to analyze why he may be having certain thoughts. According to Carlos, this is the act of being mindful.

***Carlos and teaching.*** When he was twenty-one, Carlos earned his Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) certification. He traveled around the world

teaching English off and on for six years, but he felt that he was not fulfilling his desire to help people:

Then I was trying to figure out what I was gonna do with myself. I still had that goal in mind, but of course—but incredibly vague—I wanna help people, but I don't know how. It was also the practical side of making my way. I was talking to my mom one day, and it was actually she who suggested—she said, well, I could teach high school. Right when she said that, it totally clicked and felt right. I said, “Okay, I'll come back and teach high school English.”

Because he has “...never really strayed from [his] mission to help others...” teaching in a more traditional and stable setting has helped Carlos feel he is doing more to help others and fulfill his mission.

Carlos explained being a teacher means he always has to be a learner as well, “...there's the element of learning as a teacher. It seems that if you're really teaching, then you're also learning.” For him, this also means learning about your students as individuals. Carlos believes that being a teacher is, “... about the opportunity to connect with people and to communicate with people, and hopefully share something previously unknown or unexplored. To get them to be interested in their search also.”

Stability and relationships are important to Carlos considering his explanation of a “mindful teacher.” According to Carlos, a mindful teacher is someone who takes the time to get to know his or her students and their needs and then guides students, so they can “...grow in awareness of themselves.” Recall that Carlos values reflection and considers it a component of being mindful. Perhaps because Carlos experienced an existential crisis

when he was in high school, he believes it is his responsibility to help his students use reflection to think about who they are and what they value, so they emerge from his class more self-aware.

At the time of our interview, Carlos completed his first semester teaching high school English at a low-income school on the East Coast.

**Sarah.** Sarah is a white, forty-two-year-old secondary education teacher. She was referred to me by another mindfulness in education researcher. I interviewed Sarah over winter break, and because we had a limited amount of time before she returned back to the classroom, I was not able to interview Sarah using the three-part series I had used with the other participants. However, I was still able to ask her the main questions and several follow up questions. Sarah's interview was conducted over the phone because she lives on the West Coast.

***Sarah and mindfulness.*** Sarah first became interested in mindfulness practices fifteen years ago when she was in graduate school studying social work. She was working the graveyard shift and was having trouble sleeping, and she was “a little stressed out.” A classmate suggested that she start meditating, and Sarah said she liked meditating because it helped her relax and fall asleep. She recalled this experience,

I didn't know that that's what I was doing at the time. I didn't know that neuro-scientifically speaking I was helping with my breath and that was helping with my rest. I just knew that it felt good [*chuckles*]; that it was working.

The “helping with my breath” that Sarah refers to is a technique for learning how to meditate. Focusing on our breath allows us focus on something other than the thoughts

that arise, and physiologically speaking, we are slowing our heart rate and calming our muscles, hence Sarah's sense of feeling more rested.

Of the four people I interviewed, Sarah was the only person who identified herself as a member of a particular religion. She is a Buddhist. Part of the reason I was not able to do the three-part interview with Sarah was because she was going to a meditation retreat over the break before she had to return back to teaching.

When asked to explain what being a mindfulness practitioner means to her, Sarah pauses, "Well, this is where it gets a little tricky because I identify as a Buddhist." She framed her explanation of being a mindfulness practitioner in relation to upholding the bodhisattva<sup>4</sup> vow and having a regular meditation practice:

Once I took the vows, the bodhisattva vows, then that really deepened my practice, so for me it's more than just the breathing part, but there's the world view just as far as right speech and right action and all the stuff that goes along with that. But, if I were to limit it by saying a mindfulness practitioner, what it means is it means waking up every day and sitting before anything else anywhere from 20 to 45 minutes. It means attending daylongs or weeklongs if I can. It means meeting with other mindfulness practitioners and teachers of mindfulness, seeking higher people who have more experience than me, um, reading up on

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<sup>4</sup> "The bodhisattva vow is the commitment to put others before oneself. Taking the bodhisattva vow implies that instead of holding our own individual territory and defending it tooth and nail, we become open to the world that we are living in" (Gimian, 2006, n.p.).



mindfulness, reading articles, learning more about it, and connecting with another mindfulness practitioners.

More like Josh's explanation of mindfulness and less like Nora's and Carlos's, Sarah's explanation goes beyond seeing mindfulness as a cognitive tool. Yes, she recognizes the physiological benefits, but for her practicing mindfulness is a spiritual endeavor. As a Buddhist, she believes that one has to practice mindfulness, at length, regularly and meet with others who are more skilled in the area of mindfulness in order to be a true practitioner. Sarah values meditation not only for the stillness she can create within herself, but for how it helps her feel more settled, so she can live according to the Buddhist teaching of "right speech and right action."

***Sarah and teaching.*** Sarah worked as a social worker for fifteen years before she became a teacher. Sarah's father was an educator and when she was growing up he told her "Stay out of education!" But a good friend encouraged her to go into education, and she decided that it was a natural fit because she was always concerned about her clients' education:

As a social worker, I was always drawn to the education aspect. I was always the person going to parent/teacher conferences and meetings—I was the representative for my students. I would manage group homes, for example, and I would be the contact person for the schools. I would always create homework programs. I would make my kids come home from school and do their homework.

Despite her father's warning, Sarah felt that she was prepared to go into teaching at the age of thirty-five. She thought she had realistic expectations for what the career

entailed. However after teaching for four years, Sarah recalls hitting “a bottom” in her life. Like Nora, Sarah became overwhelmed by simultaneous crises in her personal and professional life:

I hit a bottom in my personal life. I was going through a divorce and I also got laid off. I was unemployed. I was just in a bad place... I was not sure if I wanted to go back into teaching because I was very down on the field and I was just very discouraged by just American education at large.

Going through a life-changing event in her personal life while simultaneously being laid off from her teaching position was too much for Sarah to bear. She knew that she needed to do something to help herself cope with the stress and depression she was experiencing. Remembering how it had helped her back when she was in graduate school and working nights, Sarah turned to meditation again for comfort:

I decided to start meditating. I felt like I needed some peace of mind and I had lost a lot of that. I started meditating about four years ago, and that really shifted things for me. It came from a place of discomfort, a place of suffering.

Once she began meditating again, Sarah felt that she was able to go back to teaching. But within a year of being back in the classroom, she was feeling stressed again. Sarah was overwhelmed by her students’ behavior, and the school administrators were doing very little to support the teachers in this school. She explained,

Then I went back into teaching, and within a year I had that feeling of exhaustion again and was not sure if I wanted to stay in teaching because I was not—I mean I had my own mindfulness practice and then I would come into my school and I

would see the chaos...the kids were manifesting the anxiety of the dysfunction of the school, and so I said, "Maybe teaching is not for me."

Sarah, like Nora, compartmentalized her mindfulness practice. Away from the classroom, she was able to be mindful of her stress and emotions because she took time to slow down. She was meditating regularly and working with a Buddhist teacher. This was helping her learn to be more mindful. But for some reason when she entered her classroom, Sarah left all the things she learned about mindfulness behind. She let the demands of the classroom overtake her.

When Sarah confided in her Buddhist teacher about her desire to leave the profession, it was he who said, "Well, don't forget that there's a mindfulness movement happening. There's people who are actually starting to do this in schools. So maybe you should consider that before you leave." Sarah's Buddhist teacher recommended that she contact a person who teaches mindfulness in schools. She returned to her school the following semester with the intention to teach her students some mindfulness practices. She told her students, "I'm gonna teach you guys a little trick. I'm gonna teach you guys how to pay attention to your breaths." Her students loved learning how to focus on their breath to quiet their mind, and they enjoyed practicing moments of silence. Sarah proclaimed, "That was it. That shifted things for me as an educator." Bringing mindfulness practices to the classroom allowed Sarah to talk to her students about the importance of calming their minds in order to learn and how stress can affect their health. This not only gave her students a tool for coping with their emotions and stressors, but those mindful moments with her students throughout the day helped remind her that she too needs to be aware of her stress and emotional state of being.

Sarah explains how she begins each class with a mindfulness practice, so the students can settle from their transition into her room and prepare themselves for English class:

I tell them good morning or good afternoon and I take out my little bell chime and I just ask somebody to turn off the lights. The languaging is really important I'm learning. I say to them, "Let's transition—let's turn on our focus doing a little bit of mindfulness," and we do about three to five minutes of mindfulness as a class.

Soon Sarah's students were talking about the mindfulness practices they were doing in her classroom and word got out in the school about what they were doing in her classroom. Sarah's current school administrators are very supportive of her efforts to teach mindfulness to the students, so they allowed her to pilot an elective where she taught a class on mindfulness. The pilot was successful, so it is now part of the students' elective options at her school.

Although she is a practicing Buddhist, Sarah's explanation of being a mindful teacher has nothing to do with her religious perspective. She is very cautious to separate her religious views from the work she does around mindfulness and meditation with her students. Her concept of being a mindful teacher is heavily rooted in social and emotional awareness. Sarah believes that teachers have a responsibility to model appropriate social and emotional skills in the classroom. According to Sarah being a mindful teacher means she is someone who stops to, "...check in with myself and how I am feeling in the moment and then respond versus react." Sarah finds that high school students are at "an intense age," and if teachers are not mindful, they can get wrapped up in their students' emotional upheavals. This does not mean that Sarah neglects her students' social and

emotional demands. She just believes that teachers have to work with a lot of personalities, and some of those personalities can be challenging. Being a mindful teacher helps her be more aware of how she is feeling, and, therefore, helps her stop to consider how she will respond.

When I asked Sarah what it means to be a teacher, her response echoed Carlos's desire to connect with others:

It's not just a job. It's about connecting. It's about making the world a better place. It's about me making a difference. It's all those ideals of making a difference in young people's lives.

This may sound idealistic to some, but Sarah by no means romanticizes teaching. She clarifies that she is willing to take the problems that come along with teaching as long as she remembers that she is here for her students:

I love it. I love being—on a good day, I love being a teacher. I mean cuz that's—I mean the good thing I think about coming into teaching later in life is that I swallowed that whole pill before I became a teacher of this is how the institution of education in this country works. Accept it, deal with it, you're in it for the kids cuz you like young people.

At the time of her interview, Sarah was teaching at a low-income school on the West Coast where she teaches high school English and two elective classes on mindfulness and meditation.

## Participants' Summary

Based upon the narratives that the participants generated in their life history interviews, it appears that they all turned to practicing mindfulness in order to cope with some sort of suffering. Suffering can range from the moderate, pangs of living, such as stress, pain, and anger to the intense, such as trauma and anguish (Hanson & Mendius, 2009, p. 23). Each of the participants said that they felt a strong enough sense of suffering that they sought relief through developing a regular mindfulness practice, such as meditation or yoga. All four participants said they continue to practice mindfulness because they believe it helps them cope with the demands of daily living. Coping is a broad term used in the psychological literature for strategies used to manage stressful events (Larrivee, 2012, p. 48). Coping can occur as a response to an adverse situation or in anticipation to upcoming stressful demands, and it can be used as a proactive approach for handling an adverse situation or the anticipation of a stressor (Schwarzer & Knoll, 2003).

As Carlos explained it, "...I look at mindfulness as something that has this unbelievable potential to lessen people's suffering..." Part of this mitigation of suffering occurs because practicing mindfulness, according to the participants, prevents them from getting "stuck" in their thinking. Larrivee (2012) explains how this happens, "By learning to observe your thoughts, feelings, and sensations nonjudgmentally, you can break the chain of reactions that negative emotions set in motion, piggybacking on one another to quickly 'catastrophize' a situation" (p. 136). Josh captured this explanation when he stated, "The mind thinks it understands it. It puts a label on it and thinks, 'It's this.' Mindfulness is about not getting stuck in that. It's about reading each moment freshly,

and it doesn't matter where you are." These participants' explanations of mindfulness and their belief that it has the power to mitigate suffering echoes Jon Kabat-Zinn's (1994/2005) idea that, "Mindfulness provides a simple but powerful route for getting ourselves unstuck, back into touch with our own wisdom and vitality" (p. 5).

Only one participant, Sarah, identified any religious affiliation. Each of the participants had a personal definition of mindfulness, yet those definitions all encapsulated the concept of mindfulness as the ability to focus one's attention on the here and now. The participants also all explained how they believe practicing mindfulness benefits their intra and interpersonal relationships. Nora reiterated this with a story of how practicing mindfulness helps her stay connected to what really matters in her life and how that benefits herself and her relationships with others:

I think without my practice of mindfulness, I tend to get disconnected from myself and kind of flounder rather than stay on a path toward meaning in each day. Life is so short. If we don't take advantage of every day when you see people that you love, it's a loss. I think in order to appreciate that, you have to be mindful of your—'cuz I've had many—my parents are now in their late 70s, early 80s, and I've had many times where, I wish I hadn't been eating the Cheez-Its rather than focusing on what my mom was saying to me, but I was. Of course, I was focusing on what she was saying to me, but it forces me that when I'm over there, be, "Hey, wait a second. This could be the last time you guys are at Applebee's together." Really appreciate it.

Carlos echoed the belief that practicing mindfulness helps him stay in the moment, and he believes when he does that, no harm comes to others:

If I'm having a discussion, and I catch myself in the middle of it, I'll just become re-centered and think, "Am I doing anything good in this conversation? Am I talking bad about someone behind their back? Am I just blabbing for no reason? Am I saying things to make myself look good?" If I can be mindful in that moment, it makes me reconnect with the person and nothing malicious ever comes out of a moment of mindfulness, whereas, if you're not there, then you just leave it up to chance.

According to Langer (1989), this is what practicing mindfulness does, whether it is applied to ourselves, other people or things, it opens us up to novelty, alerts us to distinctions, brings sensitivity to different contexts, and an awareness of multiple perspectives.

In response to the question "What does it mean to be a teacher?," all the participants, again, provided a unique response; however, there was a common underlying theme among the two high school teachers. They framed teaching as more of a way to connect with others, rather than being about educating others. Sarah said, "It's not just a job. It's about connecting." Carlos echoed this by saying, "It's the opportunity to connect with people and to communicate with people..."

Nora and Josh, the two elementary teachers, also had commonalities in their explanation of what it means to be a teacher. At first they spoke of teaching as a way to help students discover something new about themselves and others. Both emphasized the belief that teaching is about providing opportunities for personal growth for one's students, not just academic growth. As they tried to explain further, they both became slightly flustered by trying to communicate exactly what teaching means to them. Josh



said, “It’s really, there’s just so much to the job...,” and Nora stated, “I think what it means to be a teacher is to—you know, it's funny, because it's such a part of me that I just think it's hard for me to describe. It's just how I live.” They both found it challenging to describe in words what being a teacher means to them.

Although she did not intend to be a teacher when she began school as an undergraduate, Nora is the only one in the study whose first career is teaching. Being a K-12 teacher is a second career for three of the participants. Another commonality that emerged from the participants’ profiles is that they all teach in low-income schools. This study was open to any K-12 teacher who self-identifies as a mindfulness practitioner. It took six months to find four participants for this study. One participant was an acquaintance that I met while doing some educational consulting work. Two contacted me in response to a posting I listed on the Mindfulness in Education Network (MIEN) mailing list, and one was referred to me by another mindfulness in education researcher. All four participants said they chose to work in a low-income school. I believe this commonality is worth noting considering the research on low-income schools. Low-income schools tend to have poor work environments, such as low salary, poor administrative support, student discipline problems, and lack of faculty influence and autonomy (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Ladd, 2009, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Therefore, teachers in low-income schools could encounter many stress inducing challenges.

### **The Belief that Mindfulness Practices Help Them Cope with the Demands of Teaching**

In addition to the belief that practicing mindfulness helps them cope with stressors they may encounter in their personal life, the participants all expressed the belief that

practicing mindfulness helps them cope with the demands of teaching. This was the first major theme that emerged from the data. Each participant relayed how he or she thought mindfulness practices were helpful for coping with the demands of being a teacher.

Josh said he had many challenges as a first year teacher. One of those challenges was trying to put in place all the ideas he had at the beginning of the year. Although he did not accomplish as much as he wanted, worked long days, and struggled with classroom management, Josh said he credits his mindfulness practices for helping him get through those challenges:

I never burned out, and I never got upset. It never was a problem. I didn't expect anything else other than what was there in front of me right then, and that was enough, which that mindfulness gave me as a gift, what made the year.

In contrast to Josh's belief that he was able to see the benefits of his mindfulness practices right away, Carlos found it challenging to be mindful when he first began working in the classroom. He said in the beginning, "...everything that could be a challenge was a challenge." Carlos found the pace of the school day overwhelming:

Well, I'm always kinda astounded at the pace of the school day and the environment, and how demanding it is. I mean, it's hard to be mindful while meditating, so it's 1,000 times harder to be mindful while in the classroom.

However, Carlos did remember to practice mindfulness when he was alone in his classroom. Then as he became more comfortable with the routines of teaching, Carlos believed he was able to bring his mindfulness practices into the classroom even when

students were present, so he could feel more centered and not let himself get overrun by the challenges he was facing:

...I would say, probably, at least it's my recollection—I'm not sure if it's accurate, but it seems like as I got more into the routine and saw what was being from moment to moment, just little things like when to do the attendance and where everything was, I think it became more—more became possible. I was able to be more present because I was less flustered, like kind of frantic, like, "I know I'm supposed to be doing something." Doing multiple things at the same time. I think it got—there was more space to be centered every once in a while, to remember. Even if it was mid-conversation, I would come back to myself and sort of feel that momentary connection with my breath or chest area. Definitely more possible as time went on.

Being able to be more mindful in the presence of his students helped Carlos feel better about his work in the classroom because he believed it helped him be more conscientious of his speech and actions, "...rather than just leaving it up to chance."

Even though Nora and Sarah have practiced mindfulness for over a decade each, they did not bring their mindfulness practices into the classroom until they began to experience symptoms of burnout. Nora took a year off from teaching because she was experiencing stress in both her personal and professional life. Sarah was about to leave the profession all together because she felt "...the kids were manifesting [her] anxiety..."

If they were going to stay in the profession, Nora and Sarah realized they needed to make the deliberate attempt to bring their mindfulness practices into their professional lives, and not just leave it to something they used in their personal lives. Upon bringing

their mindfulness practices their school environment, Nora and Sarah noticed that they were able to reposition their perspectives on their professional experiences as teachers. Repositioning is the concept of changing your perception and creating a new position from which you can view the situation (Larrivee, 1996). Langer considers this being mindful (Langer & Blank, 1978; Langer, 1989, 2009; Langer & Moldoveanu, 2009). “Teachers often can’t change the situations they encounter, but they can change how they emotionally respond to cope more effectively” (Larrivee, 2012, p. 74). This is what Nora and Sarah realized they had to do if they were going to stay in the profession. In their interviews, both Nora and Sarah used the word “shift” instead of “reposition” to explain the changes they have experienced since bringing their mindfulness practices into the classroom, but ultimately what Nora and Sarah did was change their approach to dealing with the demands of teaching.

Nora gave an example of how she used her mindfulness practices to cope with some of the external demands of being a teacher, namely standardized testing:

I think that my mindfulness has helped me to be aware of what’s going on around me in regards to there’s such a push towards, “You’d better get their test scores, their test scores, their test scores, their test scores.” In my past, I would have been a freak. “Okay, we’re doing worksheets, okay, okay, okay.” Now, I think it’s totally unrealistic for them, to people who don’t know their whole alphabet to be syllabifying words. I just let it float off .....Wherever you are, you have the option to be in a negative mindset. Or, “Hey, how am I gonna make this positive?”

Nora repositioned her perspective on standardized testing. She began to feel the demands from her administration about testing expectations, and then she realized that those demands are not realistic for her students at this moment. Recall, Nora teaches English language learners. Most of her students enter her first grade classroom speaking very little to no English. Nora felt not only was she a better teacher for being mindfully aware about what is developmentally appropriate for her students, but her mindfulness also helped her feel better about teaching in general. In the past, as Nora said, she would let external and what she considered unrealistic demands affect what she did in the classroom. Now, she feels she is more aware of those demands and takes the time to consider what is really in the best interest of her students.

Sarah used the word “shift” five times to describe the change since bringing her mindfulness practices to the classroom. Part of this “shift” that Sarah spoke of was her ability to stop and recognize how she was feeling before she reacted to a student:

In the past when kids would yell at me, I would feel tense. You tensed up, I would get defensive, and I would get into a power struggle with them. Now I just check in with myself and how am I feeling in the moment and then respond versus react. Stopping before reacting is what is called mindful awareness. For Sarah, it feels better to stop, bring awareness to how she is feeling, and then respond in a manner that she thinks is more appropriate rather than get caught up in a battle with a student. Bringing her mindfulness practices to the classroom helped Sarah reposition how she reacts to her students.

Each of the four participants related how they value their mindfulness practices, such as deep breathing and checking in with their emotions, to cope with the demands of

working in the classroom. Overall, being a mindfulness practitioner did not alleviate or cure the participants' classroom woes, but it appears to help the participants cope with the demands of teaching. All four participants conveyed how they believe mindfulness practices are a beneficial tool for coping with the demands of teaching, even though the novice teachers admit they have more to learn about adapting their mindfulness practices to the classroom setting. This finding correlates to the published research on mindfulness interventions for K-12 teachers. After participating in a mindfulness-based program, teachers reported a greater awareness of emotional reactivity and the ability to self-regulate when stressful events arose in the classroom (Jennings et al., 2011; Frank et al., 2013; Flook et al., 2013; Lantieri et al., 2011; Napoli, 2004; Singh et al., 2013). The research suggests that stress management or coping skills can be taught to teachers (Lantieri et al., 2011, p. 267).

### **The Emphasis on Teacher-Student Relationships**

The second theme that emerged from the participants' interviews was the importance of teacher-student relationships. The novice teachers explained the notion of teacher-student relationships was the deciding factor for their entrance into the K-12 teaching profession. As noted in his profile, Josh taught meditation and yoga to adults full-time before teaching second grade. He stopped teaching meditation and yoga full-time because he was not able to develop the types of relationships he desired in such setting. Josh believes that he needs to establish solid relationships with people in order to help them, which is why teaching yoga and meditation to adults was no longer satisfying for him:

I just kept holding it and I at first I wanted just teach meditation and see if that was as fulfilling and satisfying. I did love that and certainly had a lot of parallel experiences, but what I found was that at the most you see someone for an hour a day, once a week. It's not very often and with teaching in a school you're with them for the most, five hours a day, five days week. It's a lot, so it's much more of a relationship you can build up, and much more of a—I don't know. There's much more that happens with this event in terms of relationship.

So Josh entered teaching under the assumption that he would establish meaningful relationships with students. While he was working on his certification, Josh had an experience co-teaching in a middle school classroom. He did not want to work at that school the following school year because of his inability to develop relationships with the students within that particular school environment:

The middle school that I worked in, that culture wasn't established and it was just very difficult to feel like I had relationships with the kids and to feel like it was a safe space both for them and for me, and so I didn't want to work there.

This desire to be able to have relationships with his students led him to apply for a position teaching second grade, thereby, abandoning the idea of teaching middle school.

Carlos also entered the teaching profession because he believes that teaching is "... about the opportunity to connect with people and to communicate with people..." His TESOL teaching positions were temporary and required him to travel, so he was looking for more stability. When he began working at his school, Carlos said he was surprised to discover that other teachers did not feel the same way he does about teacher-

student relationships. He gave an example of the teachers' lunchroom conversation at his school,

Teachers talk about how things are going in the classroom, and I frequently—if we have a mutual student, I'll bring that student up. Sometimes—I'm always interested more in the person rather than the material. They seem to be only wanting to talk about how they're grasping certain—how they're behaving, or certain material, but there's no discussion of their lives beyond the classroom or what their interests are.

I asked Carlos how he thinks things should be between a teacher and his or her students. Carlos explained,

I guess I have, I guess, a vision of how I think the world should be, and I try to, I guess, guide students toward something in that direction, like a more—I don't know. [Chuckles] That's a good question. I try to look at as many parts of the student as possible. Sometimes I feel like I neglect English curriculum, but—I was curious by what Carlos meant when he said, "...to look at as many parts of the student as possible." He gave me an example of how he does this,

An example is when I have a mutual interest with the student, something I try to do is talk about those things. I play basketball. I love basketball. Sometimes I watch it, and a lot of my students like it. We end up talking about it, and then even sometimes during class, we'll get into a little bit of—we'll talk about a certain player, or a game.



Carlos thinks these non-academic conversations are necessary for building relationships with his students. Trying to gain some insight into what Carlos's English class would be like, I asked him what his students would most likely remember about their time in his classroom:

I think they will remember it, or at least I would like them to remember me as someone who just seemed to actually care about them and care about the world, and did not have my—I wasn't lost in the books. I always used to feel that way. I used to look at some of my English teachers and be like, "This person is like literally almost in the clouds. They're so inside of this book that they don't even know where they are right now."

Because I did not have the opportunity to observe Carlos's classroom, I cannot discern the extent to which he actually neglected the English curriculum.

The theme of teacher-student relationships in the veteran teachers' interviews emerged from their reflections when they contrasted how they used to feel before they brought their mindfulness practices to the classroom versus how they feel after bringing their mindfulness practices to the classroom. According to Nora, "...my last year [teaching] was the best one." Nora credits this success to going back into the classroom with the intent to be mindful – both for and with her students. Nora explained how practicing mindfulness in the classroom transformed her relationship with her students, thus making last year one of her best years. I asked Nora if she could give me an example to explain this transformation she was feeling. Nora put it in the context of student behavior, "Yeah, I used to spend a ton of energy on the most challenging kids, or the kids who I perceived most emotionally needy." Nora felt that focusing on the students she

“perceived most emotionally needy” was emotionally exhausting because she felt guilty for not providing enough attention to all students. Nora described how she tried to carry around a class list on a clipboard, so she could make it a point to check in with each student at least twice a day. Otherwise, “Then I would remember at the end of the day, ‘Oh my gosh, did I talk to Natalie today?’”

Nora believes she has a new perspective on her students after taking a year off and bringing her mindfulness practices to the classroom. I asked her to provide an example of how she now handles challenging situations with students. Nora explained that she now sees her students differently, even when they misbehave, “I see them as people that I’m helping guide rather than people that I’m in the trenches with, I think.” Nora went on to explain how she is now more aware of her students’ needs. She elaborated, “My focus is, are they excited to learn? Are they happy? Are they enjoying the process?”

When I interviewed Sarah, she also reflected upon how she used to be a different type of teacher before she brought her mindfulness practice to the classroom. Sarah used to take a no-nonsense approach with her students and most of her classroom experiences, as she recalled, were centered on classroom management:

...even my first several years of teaching, my whole approach was way different with kids. It was about classroom management and being a dictator and—being a funny dictator, but still like, “This is how it rolls in my classroom.”

Sarah’s attempt to be “a funny dictator” was her way of coping with her lack of skills and experience to successfully address the challenging and unproductive student behavior that many new teachers find themselves facing (Larrivee, 2012, p. 15).

When asked to explain how things changed for her by bringing her mindfulness practices to the classroom, Sarah used the word “shifted” again in an attempt to articulate this change, “That shifted things for me as an educator.” She clarified what this constituted, “Now, [teaching is] more about the relationship building with the kids, and it’s bringing my mindfulness practice into that.” She, like Nora, believes that being mindful in the classroom allowed her to acknowledge that her students bring their own histories and experiences.

Currently there is no research published accounting for mindfulness practitioners who enter the teaching profession to compare Josh and Carlos’s emphasis of entering the teaching profession to develop relationships with students. However, there is published research on in-service teachers who participate in a mindfulness training program and the implications for teacher-student relationships. This research correlates to Nora’s and Sarah’s reflections on feeling closer to their students after they brought their mindfulness practices to the classroom. The research reveals after mindfulness training teacher-participants report an improvement in observing and acting with awareness and being more aware of their social interactions with their students (Jennings et al., 2011; Napoli, 2004). Additionally, practicing mindfulness provided teacher-participants the ability to establish and maintain positive relationships with students (Jennings et al., 2011; Singh et al., 2013).

### **Teaching as an Act of Care**

Given the participants’ sensitivity to their own social and emotional well-being, it was not surprising for me to discover that the participants also spoke of their concern for their students’ social and emotional well-being. Psychologists identify three dimensions

necessary for well-being: emotional (e.g. happiness or satisfaction), psychological (e.g. personal growth), and social (e.g. social integration) (Keyes and Lopez , 2002 p. 48).

When reflecting upon their classroom experiences, there was little to no discussion about academics. The participants expressed a sense of caring about their students' social and emotional needs. This was the third major theme. Noddings (1984) contends when we care, it arouses the feeling of "I must do something" (p. 14). The data from the participants' reflections reveals close attention to their students' social and emotional challenges, with specific attention paid to their students' exposure to stress and violence. As a result, the participants expressed the desire to do something to promote their students' well-being.

Josh was surprised to discover that his second grade students experience what he considered a lot of anger, "A lot of the kids just have a lot of—they don't know how to deal with their anger. They don't know how to deal with it when they don't get their way." Josh believed he needed to teach them some social-emotional skills, especially skills for coping with anger. Josh also thinks his second grade students experience a lot of stress, and he is concerned about their inability to cope with it. Josh said there was some violence in his classroom, "We had a lot of fights in our—we had fights in our classroom. I had a fight the first day of school last year." Furthermore, when his students were upset they would "scream...stomp their feet" or "throw a chair." He then went on to explain this is why he believes it is important to teach students mindfulness practices, so they have a skill for coping with strong emotions. He taught the students some breathing exercises hoping that that would help them calm down. According to Josh, "[the students] have a lot of challenges, a lot of stresses in their life, and if they don't know how to deal

with those stresses, it's not going to be pretty.” According to Josh, teaching his students mindfulness practices will help them develop some coping skills.

Carlos also noticed that his students were not able to cope with their emotions. Specifically when speaking of his students' social and emotional development, Carlos was concerned about his students' inability to cope with feeling “aggravated.” Carlos's interpretation of this is,

...a lot of 'em seem to have this mentality that being frustrated and getting mad and violent and—like not necessarily physical violence but just violence in general—is sort of okay and normal and acceptable. If something bad happens to you, then you get mad. That's what you do, and you get aggravated. That's a word that's kind of like a buzzword. They just always say they're aggravated, they're aggravated, as if there were no choice... I just think it would be—I think it's a really valuable thing to try to address.

Carlos said this is why he tried to use the literature they read as a class to get the students to reflect upon their social and emotional development. He explained, “I ask very personal questions. Not inappropriately, I don't think-” Carlos went onto clarify, “I throw in questions that are personal,—I remember I think I asked something like how do you deal with conflict? Do you deal with it well? Do you show your emotions?” Carlos thinks by asking his students “personal, reflective questions” in relation to the literature they read, he can help them reflect upon their actions and thus make better choices.

Nora also spoke of the social and emotional challenges that she perceives her students encounter. About half of her students are refugees, and this is their first year in school. Nora explained how she cautiously approaches those students who may not know

any English and who are reluctant to begin immersing themselves in the language:

I might be the first American person that they're exposed to, and it's so vulnerable to even attempt a word. I try to be extra respectful and open. I had two of them who didn't talk until, you know, January, March. Yeah. Not forcing them or not feeling angry at them, just understanding that, hey, they're in that stage. Who knows what they've been through before.

Nora credits her mindfulness practices for helping her be more aware of what is developmentally appropriate for her students. According to her, it is important to, “Let [students] laugh or do activities that are really good for their brain.” Because she believes that the current education system is about “...producing good test-takers,” she tries to counter some of the pressure students may experience as a result of this. She explains why she teaches her students yoga,

...when I think about doing yoga in my classroom...The reason I’m doing it is not to get them relaxed to be a good test-taker. It’s to be a good person and feel good as a person. I hope that they see that. Kids can sense. Kids know when people are stressed out. They don’t know how to—they’re not 20 or 30. They don’t know how to handle that.

Like Josh, Nora believes, “There's a lot to be said for teaching mindfulness [to students].” Nora actually uses the word “mindful” in her classroom, and she provides her students with visuals to introduce and reinforce the concept.

Echoing the other participants, Sarah also expressed her concern about her students’ exposure to violence and stress. Specifically, she spoke of the rapidity to which

students have access to violent images and how she believes her students need tools to cope with these images:

These days, if there's a fight on campus, within a minute the whole world can see it on You Tube, you know what I mean? We know that the effects that has on kids. It's traumatizing. It's long lasting. We have to work with that. That's what teachers have to work with. To say that we're not social workers, I just disagree with that. I think we actually are social workers [laughs]. It's just that nobody wants to hear that.

Sarah's comment, "I think we actually are social workers," stems from her experience working with student teachers at her school. Her school works closely with the teacher preparation program of a nearby university. According to Sarah, "I just learned that the [name of school] program where they are teaching these kids how to be teachers, one of the first things they say to them, 'You're not social workers,' and I just couldn't disagree with that more." It is frustrating for Sarah because the student teachers arrive in the classroom expecting to just teach; they are not interested in the students' social and emotional issues. They do not consider that part of their job as the teacher. According to Sarah, "We don't live in that world anymore where a teacher just shows up and does the job of teaching. Cuz these problems are coming into the classroom..."

All of this attention on the students' wellbeing as well as their academic needs makes being a teacher a very complicated concept according to Sarah:

I try to teach them those communication skills, those interpersonal skills as well. That's what I mean about how it's complex to be a teacher [chuckles]. It's no longer, "Here's the work and you have to do it," but it's like, "Here, it's how you

are—I'm gonna teach you how to be a student. I'm gonna try to teach you how to be a young person.”

Sarah's justification for teaching her students mindfulness practices in the classroom stemmed from both her need to cope with her students' social and emotional issues and her evaluation of her students' life outside of school. Given what she knows about her students' lives outside of school, she believes that she cannot ignore their social and emotional needs and just teach. Sarah wants her students to not only emerge from her classroom as “stronger writers” with better vocabularies, “...but they're better people, that they know how to interact with the world a little better.” Sarah stopped, and added, “Yeah, it's way more than just the subject matter,” when she thinks about her work as a teacher. Sarah explained,

I really want my kids to feel like that they're ready for the world by the time they graduate, at least finish...with me, and that they know how to interact with the world and that they're just nice. They understand empathy and compassion, things like that.

Sarah, like the other three participants, believes that her responsibilities as a teacher lie beyond teaching the content of her curriculum.

Overall when reflecting upon their classroom experiences, the participants spoke of how they try to address their students' social and emotional needs, not just their academic needs. All four participants believed that their students were exposed to stress and violence, and they expressed a desire to promote their students' well-being as a result of these observations. This finding can only be loosely connected to the published research on teachers and mindfulness. In a study conducted with thirty-five preschool



teachers, Jennings (2014) found mindfulness to be positively associated with perspective-taking and sensitivity to discipline. After providing mindfulness training for three elementary teachers, Napoli (2004) found that the teachers reported they felt the mindfulness skills helped them deal with conflict and facilitate positive changes in the classroom.

### **A Shared Sense of Isolation from their Colleagues**

The last major theme I uncovered through my analysis of the participants' interviews was a shared sense of isolation from their colleagues. The participants described how they are sensitive to other teachers and or their misconceptions about mindfulness.

In her life history interview, Nora stated in the past she was susceptible to others' moods and how that was not healthy for her. Meaning, if her good friend was experiencing anger, she would begin to feel that friend's anger. It was disturbing for her to constantly have her moods fluctuate and dependent upon how others are feeling. This was one of her reasons for continuing to practice mindfulness. She finds that practicing mindfulness allows her focus on how she is feeling and to investigate the reasons for those feelings.

Nora said since she has returned to teaching and is intent on being a mindful teacher, she now isolates herself from other teachers in her new school as to avoid their possible negativity. She does not want to let others possibly affect her negatively because she believes that will then affect her mood and ultimately how she will interact with her students:

...but now I love these kids so much that I just go into my own room and hang, and then leave *[laughter]* ...that's why I'll eat lunch alone because just people talking about other people. That's just toxic. I'm mindful of that. I know that I can—it just doesn't feel good and I want to feel good in a day.

This sort of sheltering herself from others is important for Nora because she experienced burnout from teaching once before, so now she wants to protect herself and avoid what she considers “toxic” behavior. Nora said she does not partake in visiting other teachers' classrooms or allow other teachers to visit her classroom while students were present. She views herself as different than other teachers at her school; she views herself as someone who wants to be mindful of negative influences. I asked if this isolation was difficult for her, but Nora said she did not mind because she is able to focus on her students and what is happening in her classroom. She explained, “I think my personal classroom is such its own island that it's nice in a way...”

Josh did not physically isolate himself from his colleagues, but he did learn that he wanted to be different than other teachers at his school:

What I observed, which was strange, was--and this was pretty consistent is that the people who seemed at the time to have the best classroom management were the ones who were the screamers. Their classes were the quietest, and they were the ones who seem to really get the kids in line...

Because he lacked models for classroom management, Josh spent most of the school year trying to figure things out on his own. After reflecting upon this past year in the classroom and what he observed of his colleagues, Josh believes that he is different than the other teachers at his school:

... I think, last year, I used every tool that I knew to use or knew how to use. I think there were a lot of things about my classroom that were certainly unique...As a teacher, I do things unusual. I try to wake people up.

The idea of being “unique” and doing “unusual” things for Josh refer to his intention to offer his students lovingkindness<sup>5</sup> and his attempt to provide a classroom environment that would foster his students’ well-being.

Like Josh, Carlos also spoke of being different than other teachers at his school. I asked him how his students would remember him or reflect upon their time in the classroom with him, Carlos replied, “I mean, they’ll definitely see me as being much different than other teachers. I think they’ve already gathered that my passion is not within the material, but with the people.” Carlos’s reply not only reasserts how he views himself as different than the other teachers, but also reaffirms how he puts his relationships with his students at the forefront of his work.

Although Sarah teaches two mindfulness classes at her school and she feels her administration supports her efforts to be a mindful teacher, this was not always the case. She recalled, “...two years ago I had those administrators, and they did not like – they did not like the mindfulness...” Sarah says she feels, “I’ve really lucked out...” because her current administration supports “the mindfulness stuff.” However, she noted, “There are several colleagues who resist it and who don’t like it...” She went on to explain,

I guess to just—that the biggest challenge is with the resistant colleagues. Some think it’s a religious thing, and to—that I think because of that, because of the

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<sup>5</sup> Lovingkindness is “... the generosity of the heart that simply wishes all beings to be well and happy” (Goldstein, 2013, p. 138).

resistance, because of the work we're doing is almost subversive for lack of a better word, I think it's important to connect with other mindfulness educators.

Carlos also expressed disappointment because he feels that other teachers at his school are not interested in knowing more about mindfulness:

It's how. I guess, apathetic and uninterested my colleagues are about this type of thing, the whole world of mindfulness and all the things that are peripherally related to it. Ancient religions and meditating, all of that. Whenever I kind of get close to the subject, I realize no one cares, and that's it, I guess. I guess I feel very alone in that respect amongst my colleagues.

Additionally, like Sarah, Carlos also used the word "subversive" when describing his self-identification as a mindfulness practitioner in the classroom.

...I probably already said this, but just to reiterate, I feel like a spy, subversive, because what I'm trying to do is so unlike what everyone else—just about everyone else is trying to do. I feel like I'm a revolutionary communist and I'm gonna get found out, which is really a shame, because I'm pretty sure my aims are pretty - I'm not trying to do anything bad. I'm just trying to do what I think is right, but it's so against the grain of everything else that I was—yeah, like I said, I closed the door, and I just feel like now I have to—I can't be very open.

In summary, all four participants expressed a sense of isolation, from their colleagues. Nora isolated herself physically as to avoid other teachers at her school. Carlos and Josh isolated themselves in relation to how they are not like other teachers.

Although Sarah gets to teach actual classes on mindfulness at her school, she still expressed some sense of isolation from colleagues because she is identified as the “mindful teacher” at her school. This finding is unique in contrast to the previous research conducted on mindfulness and teachers because the participants in this study were not part of a mindfulness training program provided by their school. The participants were the only ones on their campus who deliberately brought mindfulness practices into their classrooms. It turns out that the fear of being found out or feeling that mindfulness could be perceived as a subversive act is a legitimate concern on the teachers’ part. The use of mindfulness practices in public schools has not gone without criticism. In her article titled “Yoga in the Public Schools: Diversity, Democracy and the Use of Critical Thinking in Educational Debates,” Laura Douglas (2010) documents that much of the opposition around mindfulness in schools comes from many Christian groups across the country who believe the introduction of mindfulness practices into public schools violates the separation of church and state.

### **Summary**

Four K-12 teachers who self-identified as mindfulness practitioners were interviewed for this study. To briefly summarize, two of the participants, Carlos and Josh, just completed their first year teaching when their interviews were conducted. The other two participants, Nora and Sarah, are veteran teachers with fifteen and eight years of teaching experience. Carlos and Josh entered the teaching profession with the intent to use their mindfulness practices. Nora and Sarah experienced symptoms of burnout before they made the deliberate decision to use their mindfulness practices to cope with the demands of teaching.

Within this chapter, I addressed four themes that emerged from the participants' interviews. When asked to reflect upon their teaching experiences, the participants believed that their mindfulness practices helped them cope with the demands of teaching. The importance of teacher-student relationships also resonated throughout the data when participants recalled their experiences as a teacher. Additionally, the participants spoke of their concerns about their students' well-being. The participants exhibited a sense of care for their students because they wanted to promote their students' social and emotional well-being. Finally, the theme of a shared sense of isolation arose when the participants reflected upon their work as a mindfulness practitioner in the classroom. In the next chapter, I discuss these findings further, and I present the conclusions I drew based upon these findings and the possible implications those conclusions may have upon the K-12 teaching profession.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### Discussion and Conclusions

In designing and undertaking this study, I sought to investigate the phenomenon of being a teacher who self-identifies as a mindfulness practitioner. The intent for this was twofold. First, I wanted to understand what it means to be a teacher who has a mindfulness practice and how that practice does or does not transfer into one's work in the classroom. Second, I wanted to add teachers' voices to the literature on the mindfulness in education movement in an attempt to avoid what Ball (1993) calls "present absence." There is much speculation that mindfulness practices can support teachers working in challenging settings and consequently improve classroom environments (e.g. Flook et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2013). Unfortunately, the teachers' voices and stories are missing from the research. This study was designed to present rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences. Additionally, much of the published research focuses on teachers who have participated in formal mindfulness training programs, such as an MBSR course or professional development training on mindfulness. The teachers who participated in this study are what I call lay practitioners; they have personal mindfulness practices, and they have attempted to adapt those practices to working in a K-12 school environment.

The analysis of the data yielded four interrelated themes presented in Chapter Four. Ultimately, what I discovered through the themes was how the participants used their mindfulness practices in two ways. First they used their mindfulness practices as coping tools for dealing with the demands of the profession. Secondly, they tried to bring mindfulness practices into their classrooms as a pedagogical tool for their students. In the

pages that follow, I extend this study by discussing these themes and conclusions in order to add a more nuanced understanding of what it means for these four participants to be teachers who self-identify as a mindfulness practitioners.

### **Mindfulness is a Potentially Useful Intervention for Increasing Teacher Retention**

Teaching is a complex profession. On one hand there is a romantic notion of what it means to be a teacher. Often this can be found in the narrative of redemptive teachers who devote themselves to the profession, believing they will make the world a better place (Fischman, 2000; Fischman, 2009). In their explanations of why they became teachers, all four participants expressed some hint of a romantic notion about teaching. They conveyed a hopeful attitude believing they could make a difference through a sense of love, commitment, and responsibility (Fischman & Haas, 2009, p 66.). Nora framed this sentiment within a story about a former student. She said, “[I hope] he remembers, ‘Wow...somebody believed in me,’ or ‘Somebody was patient with me.’” The veteran teachers described teaching as a balance between forces. On one hand you have the romantic notion of what it means to teach and on the other you have the realities. Sarah explained it beautifully when she said, “It feels like a curse sometimes too, but I definitely feel like there’s – there’s a deeper meaning to it.” The novice teachers also quickly learned that teaching is often not as one imagines. As Josh illustrated in his reflection, the realities are quite different than the romantic notion one begins with, “I had this vision of a different kind of education...A dedication to teach and that the whole curriculum supports teaching kids how to be peaceful.”

In contrast to the romantic notions of what it means to teach, there are the stark realities of what it means to be teacher in the K-12 system. These stark realities are what



Nora and Sarah encountered when they began to experience burnout and what Josh and Carlos learned early upon entering the profession. These realities include often having to work with high levels of uncertainty, emotion, and attention to others (Helsing, 2007; Schutz & Zembylas, 2009; Zapf, 2002). As a result, teachers often experience high levels of occupational stress (Dunham & Varma, 1998; International Labour Office, 1993; Kyriacou, 2000; Travers & Cooper, 1996). According to Larrivee (2012), “Stress and burnout are common among teachers as they struggle to cope with an increasingly bureaucratic system, with more students who are needy and troubled, and with ever-increasing responsibilities” (p. 7). Additionally, all four participants in this study work in low-income schools. The research on teachers working in low-income schools reveals they may experience more stress than other teachers (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Boyd et al., 2011; Ladd, 2009, 2011; Loeb, Darling-Hammond, & Luczak, 2005). Each participant admitted teaching could be stressful. For example, Carlos was amazed at the pace of the school day and how demanding it is to be a teacher. It was not something he was prepared for. Josh felt classroom management and culture was one of his biggest challenges, “Because I wasn’t responding to things in the appropriate way...I didn’t know how to respond to what was happening in the classroom.” As a result, Josh thought,

That made [teaching] difficult. That made it difficult for everyone. It made it difficult for the teacher. It made it difficult for the kid that was going through it. It made it difficult for the other kids who were in the room with it happening.

However despite these challenges, the participants conveyed in their interviews how practicing mindfulness helped them cope on a personal level with the demands of

being a teacher, one of the key findings in this study. It appears from this finding that mindfulness is a potentially useful tool for helping teachers cope with the stressful demands of being a teacher.

For example, Josh explained how his mindfulness practices helped him cope with the long workdays and the uncertainty that can come with being a new teacher:

That became the biggest joke because in my mind, I completely understood I shouldn't be able to do this. How should I be able to do this? Nobody taught me how to do this. I don't know how to do this. I could laugh about that, honestly, without saying to myself, "I should be able to do this," or, "Why can't I do this?" Or, "What's wrong with me?" That didn't have to enter my consciousness at all. This is where mindfulness really, really supported me and why I never broke down or it was never--I was working 13 hours every day and my co-teacher was saying to me all the time, "You're going to burnout. You're going to burnout."

Josh believed that his mindfulness practices helped him stay grounded and not get swept up in critical self-judgment. Part of his mindfulness practice is the practice of non-judgment, to accept things as they are without getting caught up in labeling them as good or bad. As a first year teacher, Josh said it was unrealistic for him to know how to do everything a teacher needs to do and should do. In mindfulness, acceptance is not about approving of the situation; it is about acknowledging the present non-judgmentally. He thought being mindful of his self-talk was helpful as well. This is significant considering about 77% of our self-talk is negative (Helmstetter, 1990). Self-talk is the running commentary going on inside one's head, and the quality of our self-talk is important because our emotional state depends upon what we tell ourselves (Larrivee, 2012, p.

107). Rather than get upset with himself for not doing as well as he intended as a teacher, Josh chose to be mindful and to recognize that it is impossible for him to know everything he needs to be doing and should be doing as a new teacher. He described it as, "... the practice of not ruminating." Despite the many challenges and long hours he faced as a new teacher, Josh believed being mindful of his emotions and accepting his situations and experiences as they were without judgment helped him cope with the stress he encountered as a new teacher.

Even though Carlos felt, "...it's 1,000 times harder to be mindful while in the classroom," he did express the belief that his mindfulness practices helped him cope with the demands of being a teacher. He found great value in simple moments where he was able to stop and check in with himself and focus deeply on his breathing, so he could feel more centered and not get overwhelmed with the demands of teaching:

Sometimes it's in the heat of the moment when I come back to myself and have a moment of being centered, and sometimes it's after everyone has left and I'm by myself. Then I take a couple deep breaths, and then I try to stay in it, or try to reflect on what's happened.

In this excerpt, Carlos relates how he used his mindfulness practice of deep breathing to calm himself. The use of deep breathing is a simple mindfulness technique for calming the body and mind (Kabat-Zinn, 1990/1991/2005, p. 56). Deep breathing triggers our parasympathetic nervous system, which lowers our sense of stress, reduces blood pressure, and strengthens our immune system (Hanson & Mendius, 2009). The moment-to-moment practice of mindful breathing can provide the "power to disentangle us from the compulsive and habitual hold of the mind's many preoccupations" (Kabat-Zinn,

1990/1991/2005, p. 57). The mindful breathing exercise is one example of how Carlos used his mindfulness techniques to cope with demands of the school day.

In contrast to Josh and Carlos who entered the K-12 teaching profession with the intention of being mindfulness practitioners in the classroom, Nora and Sarah experienced symptoms of burnout before they brought their practices to the profession. They spoke of how their mindfulness practices now help them cope with the demands of teaching.

A common cause of teacher stress is classroom management (Beaman & Wheldall, 2000; Ingersoll, 2001). Nora gave an example of how being mindful in the classroom helps her cope with classroom management issues:

It's a weird thing. Now I can sit back and say, "Okay, wait a second. This is a six-year-old!" I can be centered and talk to them in a developmentally appropriate way, and move right along rather than be so annoyed like, "How could you do this to my lesson?" Instead think, "Okay, what do I need to shift to help them get more engaged?"

Rather than get frustrated, Nora repositions. She believes being mindful allows her to reflect upon an experience nonjudgmentally, rather than taking the situation personally and getting upset with her students. After bringing her mindfulness practices into the classroom Nora proclaimed,

I think that if I didn't practice mindfulness or become aware of my days and my classroom and find meaning in that, I would become resentful toward it. I mean, there's a reason I spend 10 hours at work. I have to enjoy it, otherwise I'd be a nut.

Additionally, Sarah echoed Nora's belief that practicing mindfulness is a useful tool for coping with the demands of teaching. According to Sarah, "That was it. That shifted things for me as an educator." Sarah later reiterated her belief in practicing mindfulness to cope with the demands of teaching, "Well, it's a game changer for me. I mean it—I could not be in this field if I didn't have a [mindfulness] practice. I would've burned out."

Because I did not measure the participants' levels of stress in this study, I cannot ascertain the differences between the participants' perceived levels of stress and their actual levels of stress. However, as exhibited by the interview excerpts above, each of the participants expressed a perceived value in the use of mindfulness practices for coping with the demands of teaching. Previous studies on mindfulness training for teachers confirm mindfulness practices can be a tool for combating teacher stress (Gold et al, 2009; Lantieri et al., 2011), especially those working in high-risk settings, such as low-income schools (Jennings, et al., 2011). It appears from this study and others that providing mindfulness training for teachers could be a potentially useful tool for coping with the demands of teaching.

### **Mindfulness as a Pedagogical Tool**

All four teachers in the study emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships and expressed caring about their students' social and emotional needs. These were two more major themes among the participants' interviews. They all spoke of teaching as something more than just providing students with academic skills and knowledge. For example, Carlos said there is more to education than preparing students to "get good paying jobs. I think that there's more to it." Because they cared about their

students' well-being, the participants felt they needed to act on their students' behalf (Noddings, 1988, p. 220). As a result of this attempt to act, they viewed mindfulness practices as a pedagogical tool promoting their student's well-being.

For example, Nora's students were inundated with standardized tests the first two weeks of the school year. Given that this is the first school experience for most of her students, and they are all English language learners, she was concerned about their levels of stress in response to all of the testing. Nora explained how she teaches her students breathing exercises and yoga movements, so they have coping mechanisms for dealing with the possible stress of testing, "The first two weeks of school they have to do all the standardized testing, which is not fun at all. That's when I teach them the breathing exercises..." Nora also uses yoga movements sporadically throughout the day both to give her students an opportunity to get up from their desks and stretch and to get them ready to transition to the next lesson or activity.

Sarah not only teaches her students breathing exercises, she also teaches all of her students, not just the ones in her electives class on mindfulness, about their brains and how stress, anxiety, and fear impair their ability to learn (Cozolino, 2013, p. 86). Sarah explained,

I talk to them about how the brain shuts down when you're in fear mode and how it takes 30 to 40 minutes to revive your brain, and so therefore, if you're scared in my class then you've missed half my class, you know what I mean?

This is why she has her students practice the breathing exercises at the beginning of the class, so they can calm down and prepare to learn.

Overall, both veteran teachers were able to not only recognize their students' social and emotional needs, but they were able to provide their students with some mindfulness practices to address those needs, namely coping with stress. Once they made the decision to bring their mindfulness practices to the classroom, they began to use those practices as pedagogical tools for addressing their students' social and emotional needs.

When analyzing how the novice teachers used mindfulness practices in their classroom versus the veteran teachers, there were some discrepancies between the veteran teachers' abilities to use mindfulness practices and the novice teachers' abilities. The novice teachers attempted to use mindfulness practices as a pedagogical tool; however, they noted they were not always very successful.

Because Carlos was concerned about his students' "... mentality that being frustrated and getting mad and violent ... is sort of okay and normal and acceptable," he used the literature, in this example *Julius Caesar*, to try get the students to think about how they handle conflicts and seek resolutions. He wanted them to realize they have choices in how they respond. Recalling this activity, Carlos remembered,

There were these really sort of amazing moments where they said that they did have the choice. Then I said, "Well, why would you get mad? It doesn't feel good to be mad. Why would you? You don't have to be mad. Why would you?" Then they kind of think about it and you can see a little revelation like, wait, I don't have to get mad. I remember that vividly now and it was really, it was cool.

Carlos also recalled a time he attempted to use the actual topic of mindfulness as a way to motivate his students in his twelfth grade English class. He remembered,

“...they—the seniors were so turned off that they wouldn't do anything...” so he gave them an article to read on mindfulness that he found on the Mindful Schools’ website. He was hoping if he brought in something related to their personal lives, not just their academic lives, they would be a little more motivated to read. Carlos described the article:

it [had] a really simple diagram. It says, it's kind of like with mindfulness on the first, on the top is, you know, something happens and then you react to it. With mindfulness, something happens, then you are mindful, then you react to it in a different way, and the steps, [it had a] really simple visual.

Unfortunately, Carlos said, “Only a few of them read it.” For those few who did read it, Carlos thinks they had a good conversation about the article, “I could see how it resonated with a couple of 'em. Like oh, ‘okay, I can see how I am reactionary,’ and I thought that was a really cool thing for them to see that.”

Overall Carlos expressed disappointment in his ability to fully integrate mindfulness as a pedagogical tool. The students struggled to answer personal, reflective questions, and some students even refused to answer them. Perplexed by this, Carlos speculated, “... I do find that it’s as if they had never been asked to think about their own psyche, their self.” He said that next year he intends to deliberately address issues involving his students’ well-being, and he wants to incorporate more mindfulness related activities in his classroom to help them cope with their anger.

Perhaps because his students are young, and he is used to teaching adults, Josh observed that he was not prepared to use his mindfulness practices appropriately in the classroom last year. Josh reflected, “I certainly tried to, as much as I could, bring fun and



movement and awe and wonder and play and mindfulness [to the classroom],” yet he revealed, “...so much of it was just figuring it out...the behavior management. I didn’t have that down for so long that teaching and bringing all those other things in just couldn’t be successful.” Bringing mindfulness into his classroom was his intention last year, but he realized that he did not know how to because, “...the second grade mind just thinks about the world a little differently.”

Although Josh lacked the skills to implement mindfulness to the extent he desired last year, like Carlos, he took time over the summer to learn how to effectively implement mindfulness practices into his classroom. During one of his interviews, Josh had just completed a one-day workshop from Mindful Schools. He was excited to have some new strategies for implementing mindfulness practices into his classroom.

According to Josh,

I think having this mindfulness as really the basis and the foundation for the social-emotional learning and teaching that as a way for kids to cool it down and saying, “Oh, here’s some tools. You can either focus on your breath. You can use what’s called the mindful jar or you can do any of these things that we’ve been talking about. I want you to go stand over there in the timeout. Cool your body down by practicing one of these things, and when you’re cooled down, you can come back in.”

Josh concluded by reflecting that he could have used this knowledge last year, “I think that would’ve been really helpful because it would’ve been helpful for me in school, and would’ve been helpful for these kids in school.”

The previously conducted research on teachers and mindfulness does not address the concept of using mindfulness practices as a pedagogical tool. So we do not know if the ability to use mindfulness as a pedagogical tool correlates with teaching experience or if it is related to the teacher's capacity to be mindful. However there is some research supporting Josh's reflection that practicing mindfulness can be helpful for students. Broderick and Frank (2014) note that youth can benefit from practicing mindfulness just like adults can. Because mindfulness entails the practice of non-judging, it could help youth reduce automatic emotional interference from stress and anxiety (p. 33). This is what Nora and Sarah are attempting by taking the time to do deep breathing exercises with their students in their classes. They believe their students enjoy the application of mindfulness practices in the classroom. Sarah claimed, "Well, the kids took to [mindfulness practices] like ducks to water for one thing." According to Sarah, she did not have to convince them to practice mindfulness. In fact they became the ones to remind her to stop and take the time to do some mindful minutes at the beginning of class if she forgot:

They really took to it right away and they really enjoyed it, to the point where they would yell at me if I didn't do it. They would be like, "Don't forget to do the mindfulness." They would make me do it in the beginning of the class.

Sarah speculates her students enjoy the mindfulness practices because their lives are stressful, and she is teaching them some tools for coping with some of that stress:

I think it's because they're so stressed out that they were just finally—and my kids are low income, urban, stressed out kids. They're mostly immigrants. They

don't have time to pay attention to their breath at home. They have a lot of responsibilities.

Additionally, Broderick and Frank (2014) point out, "Mindfulness teaches ways of relating to thoughts, feelings, and experiences from a decentered meta-level that can ultimately allow for better selection of problem-solving strategies and more effective responses to problems" (p. 33). This is what Carlos was attempting to do when he asked his students to reflect upon how they handle conflicts while they were reading *Julius Cesar*. And although he was not quite able to do it last year, this is why Josh used his own money to pay for his professional development on using mindfulness in the classroom.

### **Implications**

Parker Palmer proclaims *In the Courage to Teach* (1998/2007) "We teach who we are" (p. xi). The personal can never be divorced from the professional. I recognize that Palmer also argues in this book that good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher. I cannot prove the participants in this study were "good" teachers just because they viewed themselves as "mindfulness practitioners," nor was that my intention. However if there is some truth to Palmer's adage, and we do teach who we are, we should consider that there is a mindfulness movement underway, and some of those people in that movement are teachers. As exhibited by the participants in this study, teachers who have a mindfulness practice can use these practices to cope with the demands of teaching and use those practices as pedagogical tools in the classroom to promote their students' well-being. While further research is needed to ascertain if there

is causality between practicing mindfulness and one's perceived ability to cope with the demands of teaching and the benefits of using of mindfulness practices as a pedagogical tool, I believe it is worth investigating considering the implications mindfulness practices could have on teacher attrition and student engagement.

We have strong data revealing a high rate of attrition in the profession (Ingersoll & Smith, 2003), and we know that teachers experience high levels of occupational stress (Dunham & Varma, 1998; International Labour Office, 1993; Kyriacou, 2000; Travers & Cooper, 1996). There is obviously a need for providing training and support to promote teachers' resiliency. Yet, we offer little support to teachers. Like other demanding professions, teachers deserve and need methods for enhancing resilience (Meiklejohn et al, 2012). If we want teachers to stay in the profession, we need to provide them with tools for coping with the demands that come with it.

Furthermore, we need to consider the impact that mindfulness practitioners who are also teachers could have upon students. As exhibited in this study, there may be teachers who attempt to use mindfulness practices as a pedagogical tool in the classroom because they believe practicing mindfulness can help their students. This could be a good thing considering when students perceive their teachers as caring and supportive, they are more likely to be academically engaged and regulate their own behavior (McNeely & Falci, 2004; Murdock & Miller, 2003; Patrick, Anderman, Ryan, Edelin, & Midgley, 2001; Wentzel, 1997, 1998; Whitlock, 2006; Woolfold Hoy, & Weinstein, 2006). However, we need to advocate for developmental appropriateness, meaning students are receiving instruction on mindfulness practices that are developmentally appropriate for their cognitive and emotional levels (Broderick & Frank, 2014, p. 32).

If mindfulness practices offer teachers the potential skills for coping with stress and they can be used as pedagogical tools in the classroom to support students' well-being, providing all pre-service and in-service teachers with the option for mindfulness training could be a simple, low-cost benefit to the profession. It would not be another thing to add to teachers' workload. It could simply provide them with resources for coping with the demands of teaching and tools to use with their students. It should not be something reserved to pre-service teachers at a few, select colleges, and in-service teachers should not have to wait for their administrators or school districts to provide it for them.

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APPENDIX A

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

**To:** Gustavo Fischman  
ED

**From:** Mark Roosa, Chair  
Soc Beh IRB

**Date:** 05/28/2013

**Committee Action:** Exemption Granted

**IRB Action Date:** 05/28/2013

**IRB Protocol #:** 1305009171

**Study Title:** The Classroom Experiences of Mindful Teachers

*Mark Roosa, ASU IRB*

The above-referenced protocol is considered exempt after review by the Institutional Review Board pursuant to Federal regulations, 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) .

This part of the federal regulations requires that the information be recorded by investigators in such a manner that subjects cannot be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects. It is necessary that the information obtained not be such that if disclosed outside the research, it could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability, or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, or reputation.

You should retain a copy of this letter for your records.

## INFORMATION LETTER-INTERVIEWS

### **The Classroom Experiences of Mindful Teachers**

May 9, 2013

Dear \_\_\_\_\_:

I am a PhD Candidate under the direction of Professor Gustavo Fischman at the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College at Arizona State University. I am conducting a research study to explore the classroom experiences of teachers who consider themselves to be mindful practitioners.

I am inviting your participation, which will involve three loosely structured interviews. If you say YES, then your participation will last for approximately 90 minutes for each interview. If possible, I would like for each interview to be spaced 1-2 weeks apart. The interviews will take place at a location of your choice. If you are out of the Phoenix area, the interview will take place over Skype.

You will be asked in the first interview one will ask you to explain your life history as a mindful practitioner and as a teacher. Interview two will ask you to explain your contemporary experiences as a mindful practitioner and your classroom experiences. Interview three will ask you to reflect on the meaning of being a mindful practitioner and a teacher.

After the three interviews, I will construct a narrative profile for you, and, for the sake of transparency, I will email you your narrative profile. I would like for you to review it, check it for accuracy, and provide your input on this. You will have one week to respond and request revisions.

I may also ask for you to provide a picture of something from your classroom (no images of people unless they are famous) that represents your commitment to practicing mindfulness. If you do not wish to share a picture from your classroom, you may decline, and this will not affect your participation in the study.

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time, there will be no penalty. You have the right to skip questions or end the interview at any time.

Although there may be no direct benefits to you, the possible benefits of your participation in the research are the opportunity to share, conceptualize, and discuss your mindfulness practice and to share your classroom experiences and challenges as a mindfulness practitioner. There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to your participation.

All information obtained in this study is strictly confidential. In order to maintain confidentiality of your records, Elizabeth Frias will ask you to select a pseudonym and a description for the school you teach. Your real name and your school name will not be disclosed in the study. The results of this research study may be used in reports,




presentations, and publications, but your real name the school in which you teach will not be used.

I would like to audiotape this interview. The interview will not be recorded without your permission. If the interview is conducted by Skype, only an audio recording will be made. No video recordings will be used in this study. Please let me know if you do not want the interview to be audio taped; you also can change your mind after the interview starts. Elizabeth will store the tapes in a locked desk and the audio files will be stored on a password-protected laptop. Upon one year of the publication of the dissertation, the tapes will be erased.

If you have any questions concerning the research study, please contact the research team at:

Dr. Gustavo Fischman, Principal Investigator	Elizabeth Frias, Co-Investigator
Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College	
1050 S. Forest Mall, Tempe, AZ	
(480) 965-5555	(702) 277-0003
<a href="mailto:Fischman@asu.edu">Fischman@asu.edu</a>	<a href="mailto:Elizabeth.Frias@asu.edu">Elizabeth.Frias@asu.edu</a>

If you have any questions about your rights as a subject/participant in this research, or if you feel you have been placed at risk, you can contact the Chair of the Human Subjects Institutional Review Board, through the ASU Office of Research Integrity and Assurance, at (480) 965-6788. Please let me know if you wish to be part of the study.

ARIZONA STATE UNIVERSITY IRB  
APPROVED BY IRB  
DATE: 5/24/13  
NAME: 

## APPENDIX B

### EXAMPLE OF THREE-COLUMN DATA TABLE

Values	Attitudes	Beliefs
breathing latency	the pace of the school day is demanding	It's 1000 times harder to be mf in the classroom
reflection	astounded @ this ↑	
ed as a "social mission"	Attitudes how time goes by	then I realize how I haven't "been there"
the student more than the curriculum	feels alone/ different from colleges b/c of mf	what we do affects people as a whole
see the relat- ionship part w/ S as it in the bank → you can use that to guide them toward growth as a person	vision of how the world should be + guides toward that	other Ts are not looking @ the S as a whole person
books that inspired me → want to write S		other Ts are okay w/ seeing a S as a "thing" to be taught As I got a routine for teaching, I was able to be more present; familiarity opened up space to be centered
Students knowing mf	our space (the classroom)	energy of the classroom

## APPENDIX C

### EXAMPLES OF ANALYTIC MEMOS

11/8/13

After coding ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ & ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ &  
some comment things I've  
noticed:

1) they both put the S  
before the curriculum

\* I thought cur choices  
and lessons taught would  
be discussed more, but  
they weren't.

~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ (the more exp. T) did  
make some conscious literacy  
selections but I wasn't  
what she spent the bulk of  
her time doing. I had to  
ask about cur.

2) Although ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ had to learn  
to modify his mt in the  
classroom, AND ~~\_\_\_\_\_~~ had  
to bring it into her classroom  
~~after~~ upon returning to  
her classroom => they both  
valued their mt tools  
(breathing, being intentional  
w/ the rel w/s)

11/9/13

As I go through + code,  
I realize that the language  
the participants use is  
so rich ("subt consequence")

"Need to be the same  
pursued for them  
each day"

"I feel very alone in  
respect to my colleagues"

this research is not  
about proving anything; it's  
about the WHO



reference

P. Palmer + how we do  
not discuss the "who"  
in teaching enough