Supporting Diverse Classrooms: One Mindfulness Lesson At A Time

Margreta Doerfler, MSW, LICSW
Tiffany Green, MSW, LICSW
Riverbend Community Mental Health
Concord, New Hampshire
Today’s Goals

* Define mindfulness
* How mindfulness became secularized and integrated into schools
* Discussion of specific mindfulness techniques
* Overview of pilot site for Mindful Schools curriculum
* Data/outcomes from curriculum
Mindfulness is...

- A particular way of paying attention to the present moment
- Meeting our present experience with an accepting and nonjudgmental stance
- Purposefully bringing awareness to everything in one's experience; includes all sensations, thoughts, and feelings
- This helps us understand how our inner world operates

“The awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment by moment.” - Jon Kabat-Zinn
“...mindfulness is moment-to-moment awareness. It is cultivated by purposely 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 on our inner capacity for relaxation, paying attention, wisdom, and insight.”

– Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Full Catastrophe Living*
What Mindfulness is Not...

... about being calm or any particular way but instead finding a place for the full range of experience

... to make ourselves feel better, but to get better at feeling

... about stress reduction (though it can help to significantly reduce stress)

... the absence of thought

... about being complacent or passive

... religious
Mindfulness Practice: Where to Begin

Begin With the Breath:

* It is portable, necessary, and silent (you can tap into this anywhere)
* Connected to the physical body
* Anchoring to the breath when the mind wanders
* Creates a foundation of mindfulness to then be able to ‘drop in’ in small moments throughout the day
You can do ANYTHING mindfully

Mindfulness is not necessarily a “quiet” practice: all activities can be done “one mindfully”, that is, bringing full attention to the here-and-now, whatever that may be

Mindfulness involves observing without judging-- allowing and accepting what is

* This doesn’t mean everything is perfect– it means we can choose what kind of relationship we want to have with a situation

Distractions and thoughts are INEVITABLE- it’s your response to this observation that makes the difference

* Why practice mindfulness quietly, then?

* Quiet practice helps cultivate a foundation to generalize mindfulness into daily life
What Purpose Does Mindfulness Serve?

- Emotion
- Mindfulness
- Response

Emotion → Mindfulness → Response

Emotion → Reaction
The Importance of Mindful Attention

Pitfalls of Emotion

* Our emotions can make us feel like we’re out of control
* We get ‘caught up in our emotions’
* Roughly half a million U.S. teachers leave the profession each year – a turnover rate of over 20 percent (Mindfulschools, 2015)
* We react vs. respond—we’re less able to make a thoughtful choice about our decisions

How Mindfulness Can Help

* When we strengthen our awareness of the present moment, we are able to:
  * Slow down
  * Recognize what’s going on for us
  * Discern whether or not we want to make a specific choice
  * Make decisions with intentionality
Time to practice...

Observation of Breath
Mindfulness for the educator

* Research shows integrating mindfulness into your life results in:

* Increased self-care and decreased burnout
* Increased compassion for students
* Increased ability to connect with students; stronger relationships
* Increased awareness of responses to students
* Ability to teach students mindfulness skills more effectively

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sChYoFxPznI – Dr. Richard Davidson

History

* Mindfulness has been in practice for thousands of years
* The concept and practice has become secularized
* Began to become integrated into physical health and mental health practices
  * Ram Dass (Harvard Psychologist), Jon Kabat-Zinn (UMASS Medical Center) and others brought the practice to the U.S. in the 1970’s
  * 30 years of research and empirical evidence to support the practice
* Mindfulness has been shown effective across a wide variety of presenting problems and concerns and is integrated within many disciplines, including healthcare, business, and education

*(Grossman et. al, 2003; Langer & Moldoveaunu)*
Kids are coming to school with more and more difficulty regulating their emotions and sustaining attention...

According to NIMH:
* 9% of children 13-18 are diagnosed with ADHD
* 14% of children 13-18 are diagnosed with a mood disorder
* 25.1% of children 13-18 are diagnosed with an anxiety disorder

According to CDC:
* Mental health diagnoses have become a ‘public health concern’
* In 2007-11.3% of children aged 2–17 years had been diagnosed with an emotional, behavioral, or developmental condition and nearly 50% of adolescents aged 13–18 years had ever had a mental health disorder.

(NIMH, 2015; Perou, et. Al, 2013)
Research shows that the implementation of mindfulness in the classroom is connected to improvements in:

* Executive brain function - impulse control, planning, reasoning, problem solving, etc.
* Memory
* Attention
* Emotional resilience
* Academic performance
* Student behavior
* Ability to manage ongoing stress

https://youtu.be/D83VV18Lc5s

Calm Classroom, 2014
Subcortex & Frontal Lobe
The brain stem is our most primal part of the brain-- it is responsible for the fight, flight, or freeze response.

The frontal lobe is responsible for executive functioning: planning, reasoning, problem solving, impulse control, etc.

When the body perceives threat or fear, the subcortex, limbic system, and brain stem (sympathetic nervous system) go into overdrive and the frontal lobe is DEACTIVATED. This means we are reacting emotionally and can’t make good choices!

Mindfulness helps us SLOW down and engage prefrontal cortex (parasympathetic nervous system) in order to make better choices.

Repetition of mindfulness practice actually changes the brain.
How are we changing experience?

- Begin with focusing on bodily sensations as a base, noticing changes in the sensory field, strengthening this body-brain connection

- Move toward more sustained attention states

- Reduce habits and reactions, increasing responses and choices

- Strengthen the ability to shift from sympathetic nervous system to parasympathetic nervous system

- Change from top-down regulation (e.g., using the prefrontal cortex to down-regulate the limbic system through reappraisal) to down-up regulation.

- This process strengthens the neuro-circuitry in a different and more helpful way-- neurons that fire together, wire together.

  (Farb, Anderson, & Segal, 2012)
Hand Model of the Brain
Our Pilot Site

* Broken Ground elementary School in Concord, NH
  * Serves Grades 3, 4, and 5
  * Concord, NH has served as a refugee relocation site for several years: during 2008-2014, 1,339 refugees were relocated to Concord
  * Refugees were resettled from the following countries in FY 2014: Serbia, Russia, Burundi, DRC, Ethiopia, Nigeria, Rwanda, Sierra Leone, Somalia, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Vietnam, Bhutan, Burma-Rohingya, Afghanistan, and Iraq
Mindfulness skills are fully accessible to students regardless of their:
* Level of English language proficiency
* Level of cognitive ability
* Socio-economic status
* Age
* Severity and range of symptoms
Demographics

• 40% of students receive free or reduced-cost lunch
• 20% of students receive therapy, either in school or in an outpatient setting
• 15% are English Language Learners
• 30% were identified in universal screening process (SSBD) with internalizing, externalizing, or academic problems
Mindful Schools
Participants at Pilot Site

* Third Grade Classrooms: 3 out of 6
* Fourth Grade Classrooms: 5 out of 6
* Fifth Grade Classrooms: 3 out of 5
* Total Students Served: 253

* Children in these classrooms represent the full continuum of students typically served by this elementary school:
  * “typical” students
  * refugee students
  * attention problems
  * emotion regulation/mental health problems (e.g. depression, anxiety, ASD)
  * learning and intellectual differences
About Mindful Schools

• Established in Oakland, CA
• Includes sixteen 15-minute mindfulness lessons
• Can be used in conjunction with any kind of SEL Curricula
• Teachers/support staff stay in classroom to learn the material alongside students
• Two foundational lessons are taught in first two sessions and built upon in subsequent sessions
• Once the techniques are taught/internalized, the main instruction is to repeat short moments of practice throughout the day
• There is a worksheet for each lesson to help children internalize & generalize skills
Outcomes

* Of the 11 classrooms, teachers felt mindfulness created an environment where they could get significantly more instructional time PER DAY:
  - 5-10 minutes  64% of respondents
  - 11-20 minutes 18% of respondents
  - 21-30 minutes 18 % of respondents
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Student Relatedness</th>
<th>Attention</th>
<th>Student Ability to Settle Down</th>
<th>Impulse Control</th>
<th>Emotion Regulation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Very Helpful</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>67%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Somewhat Helpful</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Mind Full, or Mindful?
Before introducing curriculum to the classroom, meet privately with students who may disrupt the process in order to preview material.

Suggestions to introduce:

- “Has anyone ever felt mad, sad, or nervous, and didn’t know how to feel better?”
- “Has anyone ever done something when they were upset, angry, etc., and then later felt badly about it?”
- “Has anyone ever got really distracted in class and by the time you realized it, you had no idea what was going on?”

Create a “container” including agreements and structure for mindfulness time.
A Consideration For Trauma

* Trauma affects brain development and alters responses for children and teens
* Educators need to be aware that some responses and behaviors may be the result of adverse childhood experiences or chronic stress
* When practicing and teaching mindfulness, be curious about the child’s responses
* Be responsive, compassionate, and considerate if you are aware of the child’s history
* Offer accommodations - eyes open for example
Many kids have not been taught to pay attention to their bodies, therefore we can’t expect them to know HOW to regulate them.

Great foundation for other mindfulness exercises—easy to reference anytime once established

Reinforce practice and talk about experience

“We can wear our mindful bodies and we can take them off. So until next time we practice, we’re going to take our mindful bodies off.”
Mindful Breathing

* Teaches kids not just to breathe, but to pay attention to their breathing, to notice when they are distracted, and refocus on breath
* Using the belly as their “anchor”
* Easy for kids to use and understand

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K3hXqh93QR0
## More Mindfulness Exercises

### Mindful Colors
* Choose a color and have kids close their eyes
* Individually or in small groups, have them name 5 things in the room that are that color
* Have them open their eyes and repeat exercise
* Discussion: What was the difference?

### Gratitude
* Teaches children to look for the positive and be more mindful of the good in their lives
* Places emphasis on gratitude not just for “big” things, but also simpler, everyday things
* Makes connection that shifting our attention helps to shift our feelings
Video Example
Hand Breathing
Mindful Walking

* What do you notice using your five senses:
  * Smell
  * Hearing
  * Taste
  * Touch
  * Feel
Counting to 5 Senses

* In THIS moment:
  * What do you
    * Smell
    * Hear
    * Taste
    * Touch
    * Feel
Mindful Eating

* Mindful snack
* Smaller groups- Mindful Bite
* Candy/Raisins, etc.
  * Smell
  * Hear
  * Taste
  * Touch
  * Feel
If a Child Refuses...

* Self reflection
  * How mindful was I? How did I present/explain things?
* Request they sit quietly for allotted time and they have the choice to participate or not.
* Don’t expect perfection
* Check in with them one on one afterwards
* Check your intentions and judgments
Even If You Choose Not To Teach Mindfulness…

Being a mindful educator is a very powerful intervention
Questions and Troubleshooting?
Resources/Programs

* Mindfulschools.org
* Calm Classroom
* Mindup (The Hawk Foundation, 2011)- http://thehawnfoundation.org/mindup/
* http://stopbreathethink.org/
* http://www.roomtobreathefilm.com/resources/organizations/index.html
* http://www.mindfuleducation.org/about-ame/
* http://www.edutopia.org/
* http://www.modmind.org