
**Preparing New Teachers for the Full Catastrophe
of the Twenty-First-Century Classroom:
Integrating Mindfulness Training into
Initial Teacher Education**

*Geoffrey B. Soloway, Patricia A. Poulin, and
Corey S. Mackenzie*

Hen ~~353~~
353
Hamilton
Steel

It is 8:30 on Wednesday morning. Thirty-five teacher candidates are sitting in a circle and the bell rings. This bell is different from the regular school bell. The chime is rung three times to signal the beginning of a group mindfulness practice, which is the way each class starts. Teacher candidates are invited to settle into their chairs and to notice thoughts, emotions, and sensations in the body. They are instructed to cultivate acceptance in response to whatever they notice, moment by moment, by maintaining the focus of their attention on the breath.

Sitting in a classroom without desks is already a foreign experience for many. Now they are intentionally entering stillness and silence in the company of their peers and instructors. Dubiousness arises; mind waves come to shore repeatedly: “Why are we sitting in a circle? What’s the point of this exercise? What does it have to do with education? I can’t stay focused on the breath. I am not very good at this.”

As their mindfulness practices build, these teacher candidates learn that during stressful times it is possible to connect with a slow, still awareness that lies beneath the surface of moment-to-moment experiences; an awareness that remains undisturbed, able to witness the regular flow of thoughts, sensations, and emotions—and then let them go. The chime rings again, signaling the end of the practice and the beginning of a discussion about what was noticed and how this relates to teaching and learning.

BEGINNINGS AND BACKGROUND

It was a spark of synchronicity that brought together an assistant professor and two graduate students. A new elective course was being designed within the initial teacher education program at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education of the University of Toronto (OISE/UT) entitled *Stress and Burnout: Teacher and Student Applications*. This new class intended to address the problems of burnout and attrition among beginning teachers, many of whom decide to leave the profession early in their career due to their inability to cope with the increasing complexity and emotional demands of the classroom (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005).

The program goal was to develop a curriculum of study that would help teacher candidates cultivate competencies for thriving and coping with the modern demands of being a teacher. A program of study was created with mindfulness at its core. Mindfulness-based interventions are increasingly available in North American and European health-care institutions. Mindfulness training strengthens one's capacity to pay attention, nonjudgmentally, to one's thoughts, feelings, and body sensations, thereby enabling a more skillful response to life's challenges. Kabat-Zinn (1990) developed and evaluated the first structured mindfulness-based program (Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, MBSR). Since then, a growing body of empirical evidence has emerged supporting the efficacy of MBSR programs in reducing stress and improving physical and mental health outcomes (Grossman, Niemann, Schmidt, & Walach, 2004).

Under the umbrella of education, there was a need for and opportunity to translate this work for teacher candidates. Rather than simply providing teacher candidates with a traditional MBSR program, the program was adapted in two ways. First, a formal wellness component was added to emphasize not only the need to reduce stress but also to enhance well-being. Second, methods of practicing mindfulness in the classroom were incorporated. In this way, working with teachers candidates also introduces the potential of providing them with strategies for infusing mindful wellness into their classrooms for their students' benefit. The core curriculum created for the *Stress and Burnout* course is called *Mindfulness-Based Wellness Education (MBWE)*.

MINDFULNESS-BASED WELLNESS EDUCATION IN PRACTICE

The three authors taught MBWE for the first time within the framework of a nine-week (thirty-six-hour) elective course in an initial teacher education program at OISE/UT. Since then, the course has evolved to being offered twice each year. Furthermore, the MBWE course has been continually evaluated using both quantitative and qualitative methods in order to better understand its impact and to support its evolution.

The primary objectives of the course are to help teacher candidates do the following:

1. Enhance their ability to respond (versus react) to stressful situations both within and outside of the classroom in order to reduce their levels of stress and improve their health;
2. Explore their understanding and experience of various aspects of wellness; and
3. Learn teaching strategies for bringing mindfulness and wellness into their classrooms.

The first objective is met through the introduction of mindfulness via both formal and informal practices. Formal mindfulness practices are twenty minutes in length and are similar to those used in MBSR programs, including the body scan, mindful yoga, and mindful sitting meditations focusing on the breath. Teacher candidates participate in formal mindfulness practices in class and also at home four days per week for twenty minutes, and receive a guided version of each practice on a CD to support their homework practice. Teacher candidates are also encouraged to *bring mindfulness to life* by integrating present-moment awareness into everyday common activities such as eating, speaking, listening, and by paying particular attention to emotions and common thought patterns.

The second objective is met by introducing teacher candidates to a wellness wheel. As shown in figure 21.1, the wellness wheel has mindfulness in the center surrounded by seven dimensions of wellness, including physical, emotional, social, mental, ecological, vocational, and spiritual.

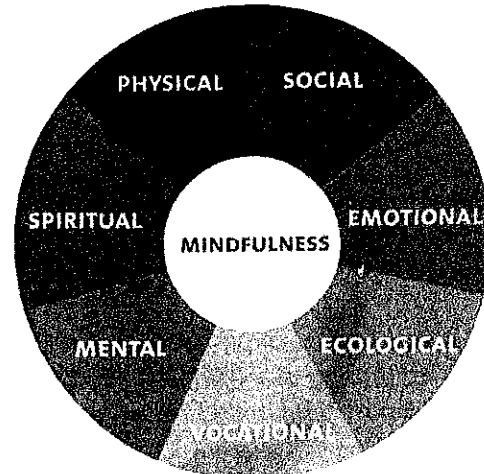


Figure 21.1. Wellness Wheel

The wellness wheel serves as a framework to explore a new dimension of wellness each week, through the lens of mindfulness. Teacher candidates use arts-based methods to create a piece of their wellness wheel to illustrate their learning through collage, painting, or drawing. At the end of the course they have a whole wheel, representing their personal multidimensional wellness.

Finally, the third objective is met by introducing, each week, discussion of a mindful teaching strategy for the classroom. For example, teacher candidates role-play challenging communications with parents using skills learned in the course. They also learn to use the wellness wheel for classroom planning and to develop an integrative curriculum.

EXPERIENTIAL CURRICULUM

To complement in-class and at-home formal and informal mindfulness practices, teacher candidates receive a set of readings consisting of key theoretical articles on mindfulness, wellness, and teaching from books such as Kabat-Zinn's (1990) *Full Catastrophe Living*, Palmer's (1998) *The Courage to Teach*, and Miller's (1996) *The Holistic Curriculum*. Teacher candidates also receive a wellness workbook that is color coded to the theme of wellness being explored that week and includes a space

additional support of our earlier findings, but it also demonstrated that improvements in mindfulness predicted improved teaching self-efficacy and physical health ratings (Poulin, 2009).

IMPLICATIONS

The introduction of mindfulness-based strategies into teacher education and K–12 education is in motion and, in turn, the MBWE program continues to evolve. The initial intention for the course and research was centered on reducing stress and enhancing wellness in order to reduce the risk of burn-out and attrition among beginning teachers. However, after teaching the course a number of times, new insights have revealed wider implications for mindfulness training within initial teacher education. For example, after returning from practicum, teacher candidates are reporting an important link between their learning in MBWE and their experience in the classroom:

My attitude and mind-set can be picked up by the students and when I present myself as a balanced and mindful teacher, the students will respond in a calmer manner. The basics of this course can be used to approach classroom management from an entirely different perspective.

Jennings and Greenberg (2009) identified social and emotional competence (SEC) and well-being of the teacher as an integral part of cultivating a healthy teacher–student relationship and effective classroom management skills. Further, the growing research investigating the impact of mindfulness practice with children and youth (Burke, 2010) suggested that mindfulness training for preservice teachers will extend beyond a preventive approach to teacher stress and burnout. Mindful teachers will also bring knowledge, skills, and strategies into the classroom for students. Graduates from our program have already begun doing so and have found it helpful as a best practice (Poulin, 2009).

MOVING FORWARD MINDFULLY

Over the years, the impact of bringing mindful wellness into initial teacher education has become more complex and meaningful in ways we

for teacher candidates to record their observations and insights from the week in relation to mindfulness, wellness, and teaching.

MBWE differs from a regular academic course as it is not lecture based. Rather than solely reading about stress and strategies for reducing it, the course is highly experiential, which helps create a practice-based body of experience for teacher candidates to use both within the classroom and throughout their lives. Experiential and practice-based learning is now emphasized within teacher education (Ball & Forzani, 2009) because it addresses the problem of enactment that arises in the space between theory and practice, "Learning how to think and act in ways that achieve one's intentions is difficult, particularly if knowledge is embedded in the practice itself" (Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 37). Cultivating capacities for mindfulness and wellness during their training, teacher candidates will be better able to transfer this knowledge into their practicum experiences and future professional endeavors. The following quote from a teacher candidate's workbook illustrates this point:

I really do think practicing mindfulness aided me in this practicum. There were times when I felt I was getting upset and I went to my breathing. This became like a natural reaction because of me practicing breathing each day. Because of this "tool" my stress levels feel as if they have lowered significantly, and allowed me to be a more mindful teacher.

Many other teacher candidates also commented on the practicality of the course and suggested that it be a required rather than elective part of the initial teacher education curriculum.

WHAT WE DISCOVERED

Elsewhere we fully discuss the results of our qualitative and quantitative evaluations of the program (Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, & Karaoylas, 2008). Here, we highlight its effectiveness. After the first year of implementation, the initial results of our research demonstrated that in comparison to teacher trainees in control classrooms, those taking the Stress and Burnout course exhibited significantly greater increases in mindfulness, life satisfaction, and teaching self-efficacy. A replication study with a longer follow-up assessment and a qualitative component not only provided

did not originally foresee. For example, an emerging theme is that teacher candidates completing MBWE go through a deeper personal transformation that informs their overall pedagogy and teacher identity:

Often people say “practice makes perfect.” In this course we have learned that “practice allows us not to be perfect.” From this course and its practices and concepts I have been able to understand that [by] being mindful throughout my life, I can embrace both the positive and negative events that happen. This allows me to continually learn, a concept that summarizes education in its simplest form.

MBWE prepares teacher candidates for thriving within stressful classrooms as well as providing them with new pedagogical perspectives, strategies, and practices for creating and supporting an inclusive and calm classroom community. To conclude, in 1890, James stated in the *Principles of Psychology*, “The faculty of voluntarily bringing back a wandering attention, over and over again, is the very root of judgment, character and will. . . . An education which should improve this faculty would be an education par excellence. But it is easier to define this ideal than to give practical directions for bringing it about” (p. 424).

Current neuroscience research suggests that mindfulness training may be a practical direction to build the faculty of attention (Jha, Krompinger, & Baime, 2007), which would not only support learning within curricular content areas but would also serve the expanding curricular objectives related to social and emotional learning, character education, healthy schools, global citizenship education, and environmental education. As the overall demands of teaching continue to increase, we see that mindfulness training for teachers will no longer be a program that breaks the mold of teacher education but one that contributes to creating a new mold of educating teachers.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Cycles of harmful stress reactivity perpetuate themselves in the minds and bodies within our schools and systems of education. MBWE provides an opportunity to break this cycle by providing teacher candidates with the skills they need to become mindful teachers and to create mindful

classrooms. Mindfulness does not necessarily bring immediate change to challenging circumstances in our lives and classrooms; however, it does provide us with the freedom to choose the way we respond to whatever comes our way, and that is incredibly powerful and liberating—for teachers, for students, for all of us.

Wednesday morning arrives again and a chime signals the beginning of the group silent practice, the beginning of learning to greet each moment with fresh eyes. These moments of stillness invite everyone in the circle to a greater awareness of automatic reactions, judgments, and biases that typically go unnoticed. As instructors, we sit as part of the circle, engaged in the same learning process of calming the mind and opening the heart, gaining insight into our authentic selves. As the formal practice concludes, the informal practice of relating to ourselves and each other with patience and kindness continues.

REFERENCES

- Ball, D. L., & Forzani, F. (2009). The work of teaching and the challenge for teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education, 60*, 497–511.
- Burke, C. A. (2010). Mindfulness-based approaches with children and adolescents: A preliminary review of current research in an emergent field. *Journal of Child and Family Studies, 19*, 133–144.
- Darling-Hammond, L. (2006). *Powerful teacher education: Lessons from exemplary programs*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Grossman, P., Niemann, L., Schmidt, S., & Walach, H. (2004). Mindfulness-based stress reduction and health benefits: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Psychosomatic Research, 57*, 35–43.
- James, W. (1890). *Principles of psychology*. New York: Dover.
- Jennings, P. A., & Greenberg, M. T. (2009). The prosocial classroom: Teacher social and emotional competence in relation to student and classroom outcomes. *Review of Educational Research, 79*, 491–525.
- Jha, A. P., Krompinger J., & Baime, M. J. (2007). Mindfulness training modifies subsystems of attention. *Cognitive, Affective & Behavioural Neuroscience, 7*, 109–119.
- Kabat-Zinn, J. (1990). *Full catastrophe living: Using the wisdom of your body and mind to face stress, pain, and illness*. New York: Dell.
- Miller, J. P. (1996). *The holistic curriculum*. Toronto, ON, Canada: OISE Press.