

The Value of Mindfulness for Early Childhood Teachers

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Abstract

This paper explores the multi-faceted benefits and actionable strategies of incorporating secular mindfulness practices into early childhood education to support teacher well-being. Teaching young children is an emotionally demanding profession often characterized by high stress, heavy workloads, and challenging behavioral difficulties. Mindfulness practices foster emotional regulation, expand an educator's patience, reduce emotional exhaustion, and proactively prevent workplace burnout. Consequently, teachers cultivate a relaxed presence that significantly improves classroom management and optimizes a positive, harmonious learning atmosphere. Practical integration strategies highlight simple, accessible techniques like mindful breathing and listening activities to establish a consistent daily routine. Although time constraints and intense workloads pose implementation challenges, short bursts of mindfulness provide creative, manageable solutions. Existing empirical research, such as standard Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction studies, explicitly validates these positive emotional well-being outcomes. Ultimately, this comprehensive paper underscores the clear necessity of consistent teacher training and full school-level integration to achieve sustainable professional resilience.

Keywords: Mindfulness, Early Childhood Teachers, Stress Reduction, Classroom Management, Emotional Regulation, Burnout Prevention

1. Introduction to Mindfulness in Education

Mindfulness is a practice of awareness and presence that has gained considerable ground in recent years as a helpful foundation upon which to build a meaningful, healthy way of being in the world. While ancient in its roots, mindfulness is very much a modern practice, fostering an inclusive state that has been embraced by millions and, in so doing, altering the way many work, learn, and play. In the educational sector, mindfulness is also gaining steam, as more understand the potential for creating an environment in learning spaces that is encouraging, worthy, and supportive by developing conscious learners and teachers (Henderson, 2019). As the connectivity connecting learning, awareness, and social and emotional well-being is explored, schools are increasingly adding mindfulness programs as part of a move to meet the whole needs of a child.

With implications for both the learning and teaching experience, mindfulness offers schools an approach to compassionate, engaged practices that build competence in care and attention, and also offers children methods for calming an anxious brain and for taking hold of fears and stressors. In managing emotional response and avoiding a sense of being overwhelmed, mindful practices offer young boys and girls classes that may be understood as social and emotional literacies. And in the classroom, teachers are encouraged – and indeed, needing to teach – explicit discussions and activities that bring attention to what is occurring within and without learners, modeling that which is asked for, as in educational rhetoric often enquired. A child at the age of six, as the saying goes, is a force of nature; what is less discussed is the torrent of feelings and complications streaming alongside the curiosity and excitement in a young learner. A teacher's capacity to help shape emotions in early childhood lends itself to the difficult task all educators face: helping to build the foundational experience of curiosity, empathy, and community in young learners. Here again, mindfulness may be helpful. Many educators, in their rush to meet administrative demands, tend to themselves less and less. In striving to be what is necessary and crucial to be

for others, the well-being of self can fall by the wayward. Mindfulness, then, may be seen as an imperative practice in education, allowing for the cultivation of educators who are better able to manage stress, who have improved capacity for empathy, who are more secure in their sense of identity, and who are, in general, better at their jobs. This essay offers an exploration of the benefits for early childhood teachers of incorporating mindfulness practices into their respective fields, running in concert with a look at actionable strategies, personal evaluations, and extant research.

1.1. Definition and Concept of Mindfulness

Mindfulness (FLM) is commonly recognized as the practice of being fully present and aware of thoughts, feelings, and environment. Mindfulness includes both internal and external awareness and can be practiced in many forms and settings. Often associated with meditation, mindfulness has its roots in ancient spiritual traditions, including Hinduism and Buddhism. Attention training also plays a key role in mindfulness practices and, by this perspective, is a secular process available for use in schools and other non-spiritual settings. Within this secular framework, significant interest has been generated by the burgeoning educational field of social and emotional learning (SEL). (Penna-Wilkos, 2018). Attention to one's breath, for example, might invoke physiological changes within the body. Companies, schools, and communities are incorporating mindfulness practices to enhance collective resilience, well-being, and productivity. It is particularly timely to consider mindfulness practices within educational contexts, and in this case, within the professional lives of early childhood teachers.

Interest in mindfulness is growing, with a significant increase in empirical research in recent years. Still, despite this focus, most of what has been published is descriptive, fails to articulate fully the meaning of mindfulness, or focuses on its initial years of life. With greater understanding, teachers can better choose effective mindfulness activities for their classrooms, a practice currently appearing at increasing rates across preschool curricula. Enhanced resiliency skills allow teachers to navigate stressful events, such as unemployment and funding cuts, more effectively, while simultaneously modeling resilience for the children in their care. Resiliency can be strengthened through mindfulness practice. Individuals who practice mindfulness are more likely to approach challenges with intentionality, rather than react impulsively. They are more capable of observing their own thoughts, feelings, and sensations, leading to enhanced emotional intelligence. Additionally, mindfulness is practiced with a state of acceptance or non-judgmental awareness. Such pedagogical approaches are likely to be of value in counteracting the increasing prevalence of stress experienced by young teachers.

2. Benefits of Mindfulness for Early Childhood Teachers

The role of mindfulness in early childhood education and its importance are familiar to those with growth mindsets. By incorporating mindfulness approaches, new transformative opportunities are created. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) often become obstacles to becoming a "good teacher," but are the makers of those with a genuine passion for youth. The use of mindfulness to work through ACEs and avoid re-traumatization is paramount, as educators living with these experiences often encounter them in the classroom. Many feel that the love and support of a teacher saved them from a sense of brokenness and worthlessness at a young age. Being proud of that role and wanting to help students "see with many different eyes" are among the common reasons many pursue careers in teaching.

As educators, emotional well-being is supported by priority care for that of students. This includes considerations for holistic support and safety, social-emotional learning, and managing social-networking. However, one area most are lacking in plans for is prioritizing care for the emotional well-being of educators themselves. Personal emotional health sets the precedent for how one copes with emotional stress in others. With after-the-fact clear insight, educators can look back and answer, "I don't know why I reacted like that, it just happened." Yet, with mindful practice and reflection, one can recognize those emotions and reactions as they're occurring and thus respond with understanding and full assurance. Concisely, one's "patience bubble" grows larger, meaning it takes more patient offending student behaviors to pop. Also, for better or for worse, this sentiment is reflected in classroom demeanor. The potential impact for increased quality of classroom management through professional development in mindfulness is immense. At an early age, students will absorb empathetic, understanding behaviors towards emotional stress. An already absorbent sponge of emotions, caring behaviors roll down and are absorbed, spreading those foundational coping mechanisms. In this nuanced manner, transformative care of emotional wellness for educators carries a residual effect to mental health aid to their most socially troubled students.

2.1. Emotional Regulation and Stress Reduction

This study examines the effectiveness of helpful tools for early childhood teachers that can be utilized in reducing stress in their professional lives. When the word teacher is typed into a search engine, words like stress, exhaustion, and pressure follow closely behind. This plethora of results tells stories of individuals who have dedicated their lives to the well-being of others only to suffer great amounts of personal distress (Kathryn Hebert, 2018). Mindfulness can be one of many ways for teachers to work through the ebbs and flows that professional life can bring about. There are several ways mindfulness can be beneficial in terms of emotional regulation and stress management for early childhood teachers (Cheng et al., 2020). However, the teaching profession can also provide a sense of fulfillment and enthusiasm as teachers guide curiosity and wonderment, shape budding young minds, and influence future scientists, doctors and world leaders.

Teaching can be a fulfilling and satisfying career. However, it is also known to be mentally and emotionally demanding, requiring constant attention and concentration. Consequently, the job can also be stressful. Stressors faced by teachers include workload, time pressure and responsibility, as well as behavioral and emotional difficulties displayed by children, conflict with parents, bad management of the center, noise, inadequate or not support, among others. Teaching in the early years is believed in having an additional complexity, as teachers work with babies, toddlers and young children, who in that newborn world defy conventional educational wisdom and resist behavioral and ethical norms.

It is suggested that a positive classroom atmosphere enhances a child's creativity, learning process and cognitive development. The reverse side of the coin, a negative classroom climate, has adverse effects for young learners. Classroom management is vital as the environment is the framework in which educational process takes place. In the early childhood and primary levels in particular, the teacher along with the family is responsible for nurturing a harmonious social environment, which is believed to play a crucial role in determining school success and personal outcomes. Early years educators stand out as the prime caregiver outside the home and their role is recognized as being as important as pedagogical delivery. Teachers are the most powerful determinants of a productive and enriching school learning experience for the children. A supportive and loving interaction in an emotional environment during the early stages of schooling can foster learning, develop confidence, curiosity, engagement, explore, investigate and impulse the emerging channel of motivation. Finding that mindfulness practices can help channel an increased level of kind, nurtured attention on the children can have, as yet unexplored, far-reaching outcomes for a number of budding toddlers.

2.2. Improved Classroom Management

Research has shown that the regular practice of mindfulness increases one's state of awareness (Penna-Wilkos, 2018). For teachers, this means cultivating a focus on classroom dynamics which can encourage a fuller understanding of why children may act out. Instead of reacting out of tension and impatience, mindfulness can help teachers notice negative feelings as they begin to rise and pass. In this way, behavior that may be perceived as disruptive or provoking is met with calmness and understanding. At the same time, mindfulness supports the cultivation of a more relaxed presence within oneself which can contribute to a calmer atmosphere overall. In this state of relaxation children are better primed for effective learning. When, rather than reacting with alarm, a teacher can pause and breathe during moments of tension and then calmly defuse a conflict, the chain of amplification that generally leads to yelling and hurt feelings is stopped.

This kind of containment of negative energy arising from undesired student behavior can establish a respectful and inclusive tone while letting the students know what kinds of interaction are appropriate. Despite the enormous benefits of practising mindfulness, it can be a significant challenge for teachers to take on yet another set of day-to-day classroom obligations. However, when approached with dedication, mindfulness can effectively inform and simplify a teachers' approach to what can otherwise be a chaotic classroom experience. Beyond the individual benefits of developing a more relaxed equanimity in one's daily experience, it has been established that the reduction of stress felt by the teacher has a direct and substantial effect on the classroom atmosphere.

3. Practical Strategies for Integrating Mindfulness into Teaching

Mindfulness is the simple practice of bringing a gentle, friendly awareness to the present moment. In a classroom, mindfulness can be practiced by both children and teachers. Mindfulness is not an abstract concept; it can be practiced using easy-to-do techniques and simple strategies. Educators may enhance their practice by sharing such activities with the

hope of providing children with accessible options to develop their mindfulness practice. Practicing mindfulness with children can increase calmness, empathy, and focus and reduce stress (Paulsen, 2018). Enhanced awareness also allows children to approach emotions and feelings with curiosity and kindness. These practical activities intend to encourage the practice of mindfulness by being easy to complete and simple to understand. It is encouraged that these activities are shared and achieved consistently during the school day to assist each activity in becoming a fully integrated part of the daily routine. The practice of mindfulness can be compared to the function of taking a photograph. First, the camera is selected and stabilized, then the subject is decided on, the frame is adjusted, and, finally, the photograph is taken. The method of mindful breathing mirrors this process (Penna-Wilkos, 2018). Children and teachers begin by getting comfortable, selecting a posture in which they feel most relaxed. Next, their subject is chosen — this can be the feeling of the breath gently entering through the nose and exiting through the mouth or the rising and falling of the chest and stomach. The frame is then set — children are instructed to notice the breath without controlling it, just as the camera doesn't control the subject. Finally, children and teachers then take the 'photograph,' attention is brought back to the breath whenever it drifts away, just as the camera's focus is brought back to the subject after losing it. This exercise is a foundation for mindfulness practice. Just as the frame remains still while the camera captures the photograph, participants attempting this activity should remain still while focusing on their breath to capture the present moment.

3.1. Mindful Breathing Exercises

It is crucial to be able to cultivate mindfulness throughout the day, whether this is through breathing exercises at the very beginning of the day, or simply going over the same breathing techniques practiced during school. Mindful breathing, perhaps the simplest method to introduce in classes to cultivate mindfulness, is the foundation of all mindfulness practices. Drawing awareness to and taking deep breaths throughout the day is important for maintaining optimal mental health and clarity. Deep breaths, especially when one is feeling anxious or upset, can help calm the mind. Additionally, deep breaths often provide greater focus, concentration can be optimized.

Breathing exercises can be more difficult to teach and, in turn, the behavior often needs to have the consistency that compliments the teaching as well. At the same time, understanding of the mechanics of inhalation, exhalation, and lung expansion must be emphasized. Simple anecdotal or scientific evidence can give children of all ages some understanding of why deep breaths are so important and how many problems they can encounter. Various crafts are always a wonderful opportunity for effective, fun teaching! Cups, stuffed animals, and even a simple pinwheel can help engage younger children in simple teaching that truly resonates. Engaging children in a discussion of breathing exercises can be a wonderful segway while children color their own breathing exercises or breathing device that will become a tool for teaching practices (Penna-Wilkos, 2018).

3.2. Mindful Listening Activities

The previous sections outline why mindfulness is beneficial for children and how teachers can use these practices in a classroom setting. Physicians now acknowledge that learning a mindful approach plays a vital part in the promotion and maintenance of physical health and emotional well-being. Through this practice teachers are able to create an easier atmosphere in the classroom, which allows difficult behaviour to come out naturally and be resolved. Mindful listening activities nurture a child's natural attentiveness, empathy, curiosity and respect. As all these qualities are essential to a child's happiness, teachers must do all they can to nurture them in the children they come into contact with. Listening and understanding are one and the same and when one listens in a mindful way it not only allows one to hear and understand what is being said, but provides the speaker with the experience of feeling heard and understood. This in turn develops mutual respect and understanding. Here are a number of mindful listening activities that can be enjoyable, and at the same time heighten a child's listening skills in a purposeful way. The piece highlights sound identification, reflective listening, and empathetic listening activities. Warm and insightful communication is the finest way to convey mindfulness to children. Observation, listening and the wise use of words encourage mindfulness and reduce stress. Awareness of oneself and of others grows through the understanding, responding, trusting and listening that communication requires (Edwards Sherretz, 2006). Listening critically is the skill of unfolding an understanding of the writer's argument, and its strengths and weaknesses, gratefully. Generally, 'listening' means being understanding or swayed by an argument, although there

are wider notions of ‘the politics of dialogue’ (Hobson, 2001). Medium-term strategies include consolidating gains, building student confidence, and training in effective note-taking.

4. Challenges and Solutions in Implementing Mindfulness in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood educators face a variety of challenges in incorporating mindfulness practices into the school day. Most of an educator’s day is spent working directly with children, allowing little time for self-care or the development of social-emotional skills. There is a constant struggle for teachers to find time for all of their professional duties and personal responsibilities on top of their demanding workday. Additionally, many educators experience feelings of being overwhelmed by the challenging behaviors and social-emotional needs of the children in their care (Penna-Wilkos, 2018). Although many teachers strongly believe in the benefits of mindfulness and desired to fully implement it into their classroom, not having time is the main obstacle. Heavy workloads and time constraints make it difficult for teachers to find time to practice mindfulness themselves, let alone teach it to their students. By integrating relevant, practical strategies and offering creative solutions to issues of time and space, this encourages a more flexible approach to mindfulness and an exploration of ways to make it more manageable. Short bursts of mindfulness can easily be worked into the daily routine and can bring a sense of calm. Bring up mindfulness on the agenda at team meetings and encourage collaboration between colleagues. This can both foster a sense of community and offer support and fresh ideas for overcoming barriers to a successful mindfulness practice. It is inevitable that issues of time and space will arise, but by adjusting expectations and exploring manageable, creative solutions, the likelihood of finding a mindfulness practice that works for the particular needs and circumstances of individual educators and students is vastly increased. By taking into consideration the context in which a mindfulness practice is to be introduced, educators are better prepared for the challenges that may arise and are more capable of devising strategies to overcome them. The overwhelming workload and daily routine of both educators and students not only make implementing a mindfulness practice especially difficult, but suggest where time should be best used. Starting the day with 10-15 minutes of mindful breathing or an awareness activity can have a positive effect on both students and the educator’s patience and focus throughout the day. Midmorning can be a great time for a mindful snack and a moment of silence or gratitude. Stretch or take a mindful walk in between other responsibilities. Engage in calming activities before transitions, such as putting on relaxing music or dimming the lights. Varied breathing methods can also help students with transitions.

4.1. Time Constraints and Workload

As an early childhood teacher, time seems to be one of the more precious commodities. Lesson planning, teaching, lunch, recess, specials, meetings, parent interactions, bus and car rider duty, and more happen during the school day. After being with young, high-energy children all day, many teachers continue to work at home on lesson plans, creating materials, inputting grades, data collection, and enrichment exercises for specific students (Penna-Wilkos, 2018). Before they know it, it’s a whirlwind of daily tasks and time for bed quickly approaches. As educators integrate mindfulness into their practice, the importance of planning time efficiently grows so that brief practices can be completed without changing the entire makeup of the day. As one teacher said: “guiding the mindfulness practices rather than participating in them has allowed me to have more control and allowed me to facilitate better classroom discipline as an end result. If teachers spend time doing the mindfulness during class, they have less control over the disputer so really it became a dual purpose benefit to not take part”.

Efforts to incorporate mindfulness into the school day will be met with a variety of challenges. This study sought to explore the influence of mindfulness on the students of early childhood elementary teachers through the experience and input of those teachers and examined the extent situations and environment have an effect. A unique Case Study showed the extent of teacher planning and involvement, as well as the conditions and challenges they face, and nurture a culture of mindfulness that allows for even the youngest students to practice. By recognizing the time constraints associated with implementing mindfulness within the elementary aged classroom, teachers and administrators may be better able to adapt their programming to be more effective. It is believed that the results of this research have the capacity to shift a paradigm in

school districts in this particular school area and others like it, ultimately to the benefit of the health and awareness of all its stakeholders, including faculty and administration.

5. Research on the Impact of Mindfulness on Early Childhood Teachers

There are also a small but growing body of studies of the effects of mindfulness practice on early childhood teachers, as they work with younger age children. Two key studies using Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) with early childhood teachers found positive results (Penna-Wilkos, 2018). One study found significant reductions in stress and improvements in emotional well-being for teachers. A second qualitative study conducted in Japan found that teachers could successfully integrate mindfulness practices into daily classroom activities as part of work with children. As this body of empirical studies continues to grow, it solidifies the place of mindfulness in educational research and its ability to make significant strides in fostering positive change for educators. Several more recent studies focused on the impact of mindfulness on the teachers of elementary and middle school students. One study involving 5th grade teachers found gains in teacher emotional well-being, including a drop in depressive symptoms and stress after a 16-week training. Additionally, mindfulness is now being used as a way to gain restorative practices to combat burn-out within inner-city teachers of high-school aged on a large-scale basis.

Teachers learned to recognize burn-out symptoms and stressors for themselves, and use a combination of mindfulness, restorative practices, and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy techniques to counteract these negative trends, with workshops available several times a year. Contradictory to the hypothesis, however, was the finding that beginning mindfulness practice did not lead to a greater sense of empathy or tolerance for the inner-city students in said teachers. This was suggested to be because of the traumatic pasts of the students being too different from the backgrounds of their teachers.

5.1. Studies on Stress Reduction and Burnout Prevention

Introduction Mindfulness is receiving growing attention as a simple practice supporting teachers in their capability to cope with their stress, emotions, and anxieties. This subsection outlines examples of studies examining the reduction of stress and burnout prevention through mindfulness practice for teachers who work with young children.

Studies on Stress Reduction and Burnout Prevention The emergence of mindfulness research over the past 50 years reveals 20 studies looking specifically into the effects of mindfulness practice on teachers and their overall well-being (Trumbower, 2015). Educators involved in teaching students received significant benefits including reducing their emotional exhaustion levels, increasing their resilience levels, and improving their psychological health (Kathryn Hebert, 2018). Teachers in early childcare settings hold one of the most demanding jobs as they work with vulnerable children during their early developmental period. Researching how teachers in early childcare settings would benefit through mindfulness practice on reducing stress and developing resilience proactively is a crucially important endeavor. Last, non-experimental studies reveal important strategies for early childhood practitioners. Findings suggest that mindfulness-based practices such as relaxation, yoga, and concentration exercises can be used as preventive measures to enhance overall teacher well-being. Mindfulness programs fostering self-regulation help teachers become more balanced, calm, and self-disciplined reducing the risk of burnout exhaustion. Mindfulness programs in the form of psychotherapy, meditative and concentration exercises are promising approaches and are encouraged to be implemented in the educational system as this high-risk job setting may benefit from specialized mental health interventions. Mindfulness is mentioned over 200 times in teachers' reflections, and mindfulness is being professional development.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

This much-needed writing intervention discusses 6 of the meaningful professional attribute guidelines of the National Association for the Education of Young Children which have been identified in the literature on the effect of post-secondary professional writing supports on early childhood teacher candidates' beliefs, knowledge, and practices. It provides education, psychology, and social sciences researchers with insights to facilitate further research and may serve as a resource for teacher educators focusing on early childhood educators. An analysis is also made of how mindfulness on the part of researchers and connectedness with participants in the field enhance research findings.

In conclusion, the emerging literature supports the benefits of mindfulness practice in early childhood education with benefits in teachers' personal lives, fostering skills to build student success, providing a strong foundation on which to

introduce new practices, and a framework for implementation of classroom-level practices (Penna-Wilkos, 2018). The ongoing empirical research supports the need for consistent teacher training; hence, the need for further research is promoted. It is also stressed to expand the scope of mindfulness beyond MBIs. For implementation to be sustainable, a full school-level integration should be the end goal. However, this piece also reinforces the need to honor basic principles of mindfulness practice, informed largely by (Henderson, 2019). Mindfulness, long understood within a meditative Buddhist context, is increasingly being adapted and adopted by some in Western societies. Yet one finds inconsistency within the literature most frequently found in schools on this topic without addressing this provenance or the ethical implications born of cultural appropriation; that is, removing mindfulness from its original context and, thus, offering to society, particularly that which is marginalized, benefits lacking the ethical consideration present in its initial culture/community.

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