

# LEARNing Landscapes *Journal*

Fostering Health and  
Well-Being in Education



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## Statement of Purpose

LEARNing Landscapes™ Journal is an open access, peer-reviewed, online education journal supported by LEARN (Leading English Education and Resource Network). Published in the spring and autumn of each year, it attempts to make links between theory and practice and is built upon the principles of partnership, collaboration, inclusion, and attention to multiple perspectives and voices. The material in each publication attempts to share and showcase leading educational ideas, research, and practices in Quebec, and beyond, by welcoming articles, interviews, visual representations, arts-informed work, and multimedia texts to inspire teachers, administrators, and other educators to reflect upon and develop innovative possibilities within their own practices.

## **Review Board (Vol. 10 No. 2)**

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## Editorial

It is hard to believe that LEARNing Landscapes is celebrating its 10th anniversary and 20 issues of peer-reviewed, themed articles contributed locally, nationally, and internationally by members of the academic community, practitioners, and students. The thrust of LEARNing Landscapes has been to include diverse voices, multiple forms of representation, and to bridge theory and practice around topics that are pertinent and timely. The editorial staff has been supported enthusiastically by exceptional people in the field who have provided important and relevant commentary about the theme of each issue. This we believe has served to push the conversation further and reach out to a wider audience.

We are indebted to all who have contributed to LEARNing Landscapes over the past decade—the authors, the commentators, and the wonderfully perceptive and generous reviewers who spare no effort in communicating helpful feedback to authors to make the review process a learning experience.

In addition, a special thanks must be extended to the Editorial Board members Patricia Cordeiro (Rhode Island College), Carl Leggo (University of British Columbia), Ruth Leitch (University of Belfast), Anne Lessard (University of Sherbrooke), Shaun Murphy (University of Saskatchewan), and Carolyn Sturge Sparkes (Memorial University). Heartfelt thanks go also to the Editorial Staff which includes Dr. Mary Stewart, who works tirelessly to make sure each issue adheres to the publishing timelines and specifications and liaises seamlessly with authors, commentators, and reviewers, David Mitchell, our Copy Editor, whose perceptive eye ensures rigorous editorial standards, Maryse Boutin, our Graphic Artist, who has ensured that LEARNing Landscapes is the artful product that it is, and the technical staff at LEARN who provide the expertise to put each issue online and adroitly maintain the website. Finally, we have been extremely fortunate in having the unwavering support of Dr. Michael Canuel, CEO of the Leading English Education and Resource Network (LEARN), who, as its publisher, enabled the journal to become a reality.

As LEARNing Landscapes moves into the next decade, we are pleased to announce that it is migrating to the Open Journal System (OJS), which is a journal management and publishing system developed by the federally funded Public Knowledge Project. The system is predicated on the notion of open access and expands and improves access to scholarly work. This change will extend the reach of LEARNing Landscapes and the work of its authors. There may be some minor visual changes to LEARNing Landscapes as a result.

One final piece of news is that Sean Wiebe, an Associate Professor at the University of Prince Edward Island, was the recipient of the 2017 Canadian Association of Curriculum Studies Publication Award. His award-winning article, entitled, “The Teacher as Silenced Superhero,” was published by LEARNing Landscapes, Volume 9(2), in 2016. We are delighted that his work has received national acclaim and that he chose to submit it to LEARNing Landscapes.

## Defining Well-Being

The theme health and well-being in education was chosen carefully for this issue to signal the historical roots of the term well-being which emerged from a much more narrow focus on health curriculum and services beginning in the late 1920s (Konu & Rimpela, 2002) and to reach as wide an audience as possible. Dodge, Daly, Hayton, and Sanders (2012) discuss the history of the term well-being and how difficult it has been to arrive at a definition of the term. They carefully trace the evolution of definitions over the last 50 years and propose that it is a dynamic construct which can exist in various stages of stability at different times. If stable, “wellbeing is when individuals have the psychological, social and physical resources they need to meet a particular psychological, social and/or physical challenge. When individuals have more challenges than resources, the see-saw dips, along with their wellbeing” (p. 230). They argue convincingly for a fluid notion of well-being, rather than a dichotomous one.

In Australia, the New South Wales Government Office on Education and Communities (2015) has established “The Wellbeing Framework for Schools.” The report defines well-being as the quality of an individual’s life and suggests that, “wellbeing needs to be considered against a background of how we feel and function across several domains, recognizing the multidimensional nature of wellbeing” (p. 2). They suggest there are five facets of well-being—cognitive, emotional, social, physical, and spiritual. The report suggests that cognitive well-being is related to success and achievement; emotional well-being relates to self-awareness, reflection, and regulation; social well-being is about connecting and relating empathetically to others; physical well-being is related to feeling safe and healthy; and spiritual well-being is about meaningfulness and purpose (p. 2). The report underscores the need for a holistic understanding of well-being and highlights the need to attend to contextual uniqueness and implications of gender, race, and class to avoid propagating deficit notions of well-being.

Statham and Chase (2010), in their briefing paper on childhood well-being in the United Kingdom, reiterate the fluidity and the multidimensional aspects of well-being and add an important caveat. They suggest it is imperative when exploring or studying well-being that the participant perspective be included, even when working with children. I would argue that these dimensions of well-being, held in tandem, provide a helpful and beneficial way of thinking about and reflecting on the topic of health and well-being in education and about the articles in this issue.

In the discussion of the commentaries and articles on health and well-being in education that follows, it should be noted that submissions appear in alphabetical order in the journal, but are presented here thematically.

## Invited Commentaries

We are pleased in the commentaries in this issue to showcase the work and commitment to well-being by local educators. **Sharon Klein**, the Head of St. George’s, an independent school (grades K-11) in Montreal, uniquely governed by parents since its inception, shares in an interview how “health comes first” and is one of the six pillars which undergird the philosophy at St. George’s School. These pillars

have been in place since it was founded in 1930. Based on the progressive education of John Dewey, which has become increasingly relevant for 21st century education, the 1930 prospectus of the school indicated that health

means much more than physical examinations and prescription for ills, or the use of athletic field or gymnasium. It means that the school life should be adapted to the nervous system of the child. It means movable sets, freedom of movement in the classroom, elimination of strain from academic work, abundant hard work and motor activity of different kinds to balance mental work, avoidance of large class groups and their overstimulation for small children, longer periods of recreation and more use of the out-of-doors; close co-operation between school and home for detection and remedial attention of abnormal conditions, whether of body or mind. If necessary academic work is sacrificed for health, rather than health for academic work. The competitive marking system, with all its strains of daily marks, of tests, of examinations, is greatly modified. (School Prospectus, 1930, p. 2)

In an interview, which took place in the newly opened fitness centre for students and staff at the high school, Klein describes how the physical literacy program at the school combines well-being for mind and body and “The Core Five Program,” developed by the teachers at the school, addresses social and emotional learning for all students.

**Barbara Kurtzman**, a veteran, early childhood teacher at The Study, which is another independent school in Montreal, describes in an interview how she became committed to “mindfulness,” or “the practice of maintaining a nonjudgmental state of heightened or complete awareness of one's thoughts, emotions, or experiences on a moment-to-moment basis” (Merriam-Webster) and brought mindfulness first to the Kindergarten and then to the other early childhood classrooms in her school. She describes in detail what her program entails, and suggests that teachers interested in mindfulness should start with themselves. Her grade one students, **Catherine** and **Disha**, also part of the interview, give their very articulate perspectives on practicing mindfulness in school and beyond.

**Maggie MacDonnell**, recent recipient of the prestigious 2017 Global Teaching Prize, spoke with us from Kativik School Board where she teaches and provides professional development for teachers with “The Compassionate-Based Schools Approach.” This approach helps students who have experienced childhood traumas that affect their ability to focus, connect, and use executive functioning skills effectively. Her programs are tailored to the gender and cultural needs of the students and have decreased dropout rates, improved academic and social skills, and raised awareness about suicide prevention through social support and physical activities.

Last, but not least, **Alissa Sklar**, an educational consultant in digital technology, education, and parenting in Montreal, contributes a timely and important commentary on digital hygiene. She describes the “Digital Citizenship Program” and, using examples from her own personal experiences, highlights the need for schools and parents to be addressing digital issues on safety, security, respect, civility, privacy, and productive and creative use of digital technologies. She illustrates how digital technologies permeate all aspects of our lives and need to be part of any discussion of health and well-being in education.

## Using Mindfulness in Education

**Piotrowski, Binder, and Schwind** studied four Ontario primary teachers to get their perspectives on implementing a “low intensity” mindfulness in their respective classrooms. They describe how mindfulness practices (including yoga and breathing exercises) allowed them to feel more connected to their students and more able to respond to individual needs. They felt better equipped to address anxiety among students and noted that the students were more relaxed in class, better able to express their emotions, and make and sustain friendships. **Haines, Clark/Keefe, Tinkler, Kotsiopoulos, Gerstl-Pepin, Shepherd, Woodside-Jiron, and Milhomens** discuss how a linguistically and culturally diverse, high-poverty, elementary school population in the northeastern United States changed with the introduction of mindfulness practices. This community-driven, qualitative study comprising 25 teacher interviews, classroom observations, and relevant documents demonstrated that the students became more self-aware, increased their ability to articulate emotions and self-regulate, and were able to transfer these practices beyond their classrooms. **Glasser**, an elementary classroom teacher, outlines how she helped her students in California to build an understanding of the natural world using a holistic approach to education consisting of balance, inclusion, and connection, which included mindfulness, art, meditation, and *Snowga* (yoga in the snow). She noted increased emotional well-being among the students, and deeper connections to community, place, and the natural world. **Carvajal** describes his work on mindfulness in a high school curriculum with adults in a Los Angeles county jail. He shares from his experiences how he learned that mindfulness only works when the teacher creates an atmosphere of flexibility, thoughtfulness, and openness. **Berezowski, Gilham, and Robinson** discuss their study of “Yoga 11,” a mindfulness program for high school students in Nova Scotia which encourages stress reduction and self-regulation. Their student participants described with examples how yoga made them feel happier, stronger, kinder, and more self-confident, suggesting that Yoga 11 is instrumental in helping adolescents adapt personally and socially to everyday life stressors.

## Tapping Into Participant Perspectives of Well-Being

The work described here shows how narrative and arts-based research approaches provide important avenues for tapping into participant perspectives on well-being. **Schaefer, Lessard, and Lewis** worked alongside Aboriginal children and youth in an after-school program entitled, “Growing Young Movers” (GYM), to support health and wellness opportunities within their communities. They argue that narrative inquiry, which required them to relinquish control, and attend rigorously to researcher assumptions, changed their understanding of productivity in this context and, in so doing, countered institutional narratives of what well-being looks and feels like for children and youth in this study. **Mitchell and Ezcurra** share the results of a six-year study of Indigenous girls and young women in Canada and South Africa and the implications for well-being in contexts that have high rates of sexual violence. The participants were engaged in cellfilm production, photovoice, body mapping, and other art-making approaches to elicit and highlight their perspectives on sexual violence. They argue persuasively how visual methodologies provide vehicles for activism and resistance and can help young women to flourish

in difficult conditions, and that the accessibility and poignancy of these art forms can promote social change.

### **Scaffolding and Supporting Well-Being**

The following authors illustrate how certain educational programs and practices help to scaffold and support well-being among participants. **Rowan** describes his study of the New Horizons Band Guelph (NHBG), which is a group of amateur musicians who make music together with minimal musical backgrounds. His work focused on a 10-week improvisational jazz combo program which demonstrated that the freedom and loose structure that jazz improvisation offers, conducted in an empathetic and nonjudgmental atmosphere, resulted in a “flourishing” of mind, body, and spirit. **Clarke-Vivier, Lyford,** and **Thomson** studied Museum Café, an arts-based museum program for adults with dementia and their caregivers. The program provided a safe space for communication, relatively free of the stigma often associated with the disease. Their study shows how competing notions of well-being and learning among involved stakeholders were complex and required negotiation, suggesting that it is imperative to critically examine perspectives of well-being which, inherently, may be driven by deficit notions. **Stone** argues strongly for the importance of play in the curriculum for supporting cognitive, physical, social, and emotional well-being in every child. She describes with examples how the nonlinear and child-oriented dimensions of play encourage deep learning, which includes using imagination, planning, negotiating, problem-solving, and building friendships. **Tinckler** examines how storytelling has a therapeutic dimension, in addition to its importance in literacy learning, and promotes a sense of community and social well-being while providing connections to life outside the classroom. **Young et al.** examined the personal narratives of 13 female faculty members at Memorial University (Newfoundland) who were part of a writing group in the faculty of education. Their writing group helped to mitigate the difficulty of balancing home and work life, and the stresses associated with promotion and tenure and workload. The group provided a space that validated individual experiences, promoted connection with and emotional support from colleagues, and helped to resist the “normalizing of unwellness.” In another professional writing group, formed by a small group of PhD education students at McGill University, **Doody, McDonnell, Reid,** and **Marshall** share how they worked collaboratively over a two-year period. Initially, they concentrated on writing during their time together. Subsequently, they analyzed and interpreted their field texts and wrote together using the Pomodoro Method (write, break, and share). They describe their individual experiences with writing and how writing alongside each other contributed to their well-being by countering isolation and writer’s block through their collaborative work. The writing group created a sense of community, encouraged balance and motivation, and maintained writing momentum. **Simpson** shares the evaluation of a sexuality education program with an emphasis on reproductive rights and gender equity created to demystify sexuality and reproductive health in technical and vocational institutions in Guyana. She candidly reports how after the investment of much time and resources, the program was not integrated into the curricula of the participating institutions. A positive outcome was that individual facilitators did use their learning to counsel students, conduct informal class discussions and community discussions, and integrated this content into other courses.

## Countering Stress to Enhance Well-Being

The papers here suggest strongly the need to actively address stress management among all stakeholders in educational contexts to enhance well-being for everyone. **Goldfus** and **Karny-Tagger** describe their work on adolescent neuroscience in Free State South Africa and the importance for educators to understand the changes in behaviors that result from brain development in the teen years. They discuss the stresses on youth as a result of these changes and the need for teachers to help students to acquire skills related to self-control, goal setting, and planning to help mitigate stressors. **Carsley, Mettler, Shapiro, Mills, Bloom,** and **Heath** discuss a StressOFF Strategies (SOS) program for adolescents that they have been studying in the greater Montreal area with 14 teachers and technicians in nine high schools. SOS is a stress management program for adolescents. It consists of four components—psycho-education, stigma reduction, coping skills, and follow-up. Their findings suggest that outside professionals are not necessary for implementing stress management programs such as this one. Educators in schools are more than capable of teaching stress management with added benefits. They can use their experiences to assist school psychologists and utilize this knowledge for personal benefits while simultaneously helping to cut the costs of the programs. **Cunningham** discusses the long-term effects of trauma on children which continue into adulthood and critically affect well-being. She shares how much can be gained by having children and teacher survivors of childhood trauma share their stories in supportive and authentically safe environments to help heal and alter long-term effects. **Ragoonaden** shares her experiences with smartEducation (stress management and resiliency techniques in Education), a pilot study conducted with elementary, pre-service teachers which was implemented in a Faculty of Education in Western Canada. The program supports the cultivation of personal and professional resilience, kindness, and empathy, and develops strategies for dealing with challenging situations and reducing stress. The results of the study indicated improved practice and emotional self-regulation and an increased sense of well-being. **Blinder, Ansley, Varjas, Benson,** and **Ogletree** illustrate how The Collaboration and Resources for Encouraging and Supporting Transformations in Education (CREST-Ed) project enhanced student health and well-being by providing wellness and stress management learning among all members of the school staff. The program focused on recognizing stress, the psychological and physiological reactions to stress, and scientifically based ways of managing stress in a context of sharing and collaboration.

## Engaging in Critical Digital Literacy to Support Well-Being

Last, but not least, **Crossman** surveys current literature on the important topic of female body perception and the effects that social media exerts on women. More specifically, she focuses on the content of “Fitspiration,” a form of social media that purports to encourage and foster a healthy lifestyle through postings and images for healthy eating and exercise which, she argues, does just the opposite. Rather, her analysis suggests that Fitspiration leads to negative body image and body dissatisfaction, which are key predictors of eating disorders. This article provides a good argument for the need to engage in critical digital literacy with all stakeholders in education to counter any negative impact that social media has on health and well-being.

**LBK**

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**Lynn Butler-Kisber** (B. Ed., M. Ed., McGill University; Ed. D., Harvard University), a former elementary school teacher, is Professor in the Department of Integrated Studies in Education in the Faculty of Education at McGill. She has held a number of administrative posts including a deanship, two associate deanships, and five directorships, and has served on numerous committees within the University and in the educational milieu. In 2007, she was appointed and continues as Outside Educator to the Board of Directors of St. George's School and she also serves on the board of Explorations Camp. Her interests, teaching, and graduate supervision focus on multiliteracies, leadership, student engagement, professional development, and qualitative research. She has a particular interest in feminist/equity and social justice issues, and the role of arts-based analysis and representation in qualitative research. Her research and development activities have included numerous international projects and locally she is currently working on the LEARN English Language Arts Project, the EDCAN Network Education Fact Sheet Project, and the NEXTSchool Project. In the upcoming year, she will be a visiting scholar at universities in Alberta, Vermont, and Worcester (UK) with a particular focus on arts-based research. She has published and presented extensively in her areas of interest and is currently working on the second edition of *Qualitative Inquiry: Thematic, Narrative and Arts-Based Perspectives*, published by Sage.



# Building From the Ground Up: The Key to Health and Well-Being in Schools

Sharon Klein

## Abstract

In this interview, Sharon Klein, the Head of School at St. George's School of Montreal, discusses how health and well-being are integrated in the curriculum and school life. Since its beginning in 1930, St. George's has operated on six founding principles, the first of which is "health comes first." Ms. Klein describes how this principle is being applied—yoga, mindfulness, exercise literacy—and further describes how they have developed the Core 5 Program, based on current research, to meet the needs of today's students. She concludes by sharing her vision of health and well-being in the future.

*You've been here a few years now and I was wondering if you could give us a bit of the history of St. George's and talk about the founding principles of this school?*

Principles are what we embody today. We have been teaching 21st century skills since 1930. Our Founding Principles encompass not only the academic piece of teaching to the individual child, but also the social/emotional piece, working in groups, collaboration, creativity, and critical thinking. All of the things that we think are good teaching practices today are really what we were founded on. I feel fortunate to be here because I feel like that's been ingrained in this school and embedded since 1930. It's really what every good school is striving to be known for now.

*With these principles in mind, can you describe how St. George's focuses on health and well-being? For example, what's done in elementary school / what's done in high school?*

Health and well-being has many different facets to it. One of the facets is promoted through our physical education classes. In our elementary school specifically, we refer to physical education as "physical literacy." There is a big push from our physical education [staff] there to really educate the children about the body and the mind, and how they work together. They are well versed with technology and they use it in their classes to analyze each child's movements in order to help them understand how they move, and how important movement is to their health. Our teachers are really focusing on physical literacy as a way of life, as opposed to a "just getting in the gym and playing" approach. And that's just a small snapshot of what goes on in the elementary.

An important piece of promoting health and well-being that runs through the elementary and the high school is what we call our "Core Five Program," [which is] a social/emotional learning program that is being developed specifically by our teachers for students from kindergarten through grade 11. We have a research and design committee (CLE: Centre for Learning Enrichment) that decides how this process is implemented. They've been working on the Core Five for three years—which includes a focus on

interpersonal skills, intrapersonal, perseverance, realistic optimism, and leadership—i.e., how do we live these things on a day-to-day basis. The beauty of this program is that it's been designed by the teachers, so it's something that we're very gradually moving forward, and importantly, we are embedding it into the fabric of our culture. The students are involved in this process as well, giving feedback as we continually move forward.

In the high school, of course, we also have this fantastic new fitness centre, which is not just used for coming and working out physically, but we've also got a big floor area here that you can use to do mindfulness activities, yoga, or dance—or whatever a student feels is appropriate for their needs. As part of our Core Five Program, the teachers could come in and use this in different ways as well. The kids are loving it, of course. The physical aspect of coming and working out includes intentional goal setting, which is an important piece of introducing this new facility to our students. The students have been involved in setting their own goals and ensuring that when they come in they're actually working towards a purpose. The curricular piece is really important—it's not just a facility that was built and "there you go." There's been a lot of thought put into how it works within our whole curriculum and how it integrates throughout.

*What roles do the students play in supporting health and well-being principles?*

Obviously, they're involved in many extracurricular and many different activities throughout the year and these activities allow them to stretch themselves and build confidence. This confidence allows them to feel comfortable taking on leadership roles. For example, we brought in a certified personal trainer and have provided older students who are interested with the opportunity to learn from them and receive training certification, with the goal that our older students can help and work with our younger students. We are giving them an opportunity to take on a leadership role in this area, and that's a program we hope to continue to expand in the future. We've just begun because the centre has only been open for a month now. But that is one of the current ways we see students more involved in leadership opportunities. I can see that in the future there could also be a leadership role that high school students would play in mentoring our younger students (elementary school) with regard to health and wellness. In relation to our Core Five Program, our students give feedback on curricular lessons, our Zen Lunch Hours, our cafeteria food choices, and many other health initiatives. The student voice is an important one in our community. In the upcoming year, we intend to focus more on this guiding principle, "health comes first," and our students will be very involved in setting the direction as to where we will go with that theme. It is important to us as a school to collaborate with our students, and they never cease to amaze us with their creative ideas and well-articulated thoughts.

*Since the inception of the school, parents have been involved in St. George's and actually run the school in a sense. How do they support health and well-being principles?*

You're right: we definitely partner with our parents. I think that's something that's unique about St. George's. Our Board is mostly made up of parents and they have to be a current parent to be a voting member and be the Chair of the Board. They've been involved in many ways since before I came to this school. I know they were involved in a food committee previously, and one of our Board Members who is a physician was instrumental in that initiative. We have board members with different roles and also other parents from the community that act on committees. They look at nutrition within the school with a critical eye. Our Buildings & Grounds Board Chair was integral in developing the overall building plans for our fitness centre. We keep our parents very informed as to how we're working with the students. We have parent breakfast meetings...the adults will come in...they'll give us feedback on what their children are saying or doing or feeling. For example, we held a parent breakfast meeting that focused on the process of how the students would be introduced to the fitness centre—this involved goal setting, and training sessions on use of equipment and facilities. One of our parents was very involved in training our student supervisors. At St. George's the adults are very much involved, depending on what comes up in any area of health or wellness. We also have parents whose work involves teaching Mindfulness and they have been great resources, as well as offering workshops for faculty and staff. We've brought parents in to teach a yoga class. So, as you can see, they are very much aware of what's happening in this school and I really feel that they enjoy being a part of health and wellness initiatives. It truly is a partnership and it is important to us that our parents have a voice. I appreciate their support.

*What is your vision for health and wellness in the future?*

My vision would be that every single student within our school—and not even just the students, but the alumni, all the community members—that it is something that is really integrated into their lives. Whether we're talking about being physically active or whether it's something involving your mental health (as I said, the social-emotional piece), that it is something that is taught in every school, not just our school, but in every school it is being practiced and being integrated because we know that in order for students to do well academically, as well as emotionally, health and wellness has to be an integral part of the curriculum.

At our school, one of the things that we're looking forward to is an upcoming building project—we're hoping to build a wellness centre which could be a flexible and dynamic space that could be used for any of those—either psychological or physical well-being. It would be very flexible and it could also be used for community gatherings. It would be a space that would allow our wellness curriculum to grow.

*What suggestions do you have for other school leaders who are seeking to promote health and well-being of both students and staff in their schools?*

The main suggestion I would have is to embed it in the curriculum. I think that anything you do, if it's really important it can't be just an add-on and you can't leave to chance whether it happens or not. It has to be something that is built from the ground up. You really need to have students involved, and consider carefully what that will look like. You need to have parents involved; you need to have your staff and faculty involved as well. If it's built together and it's something that can be embedded in your curriculum, then it's going to happen. People are going to see it as something that's really important, and it's going to be there for many years to come.

Our founding principle is "health comes first" and it is so true. Health has so many different facets to it. I really think that we should be attending to it as schools. As leaders, we need to role-model it and, once again, we really need to build it from the ground up so that it is embedded in all our schools.

*Can you get into some of the details of what Core Five is?*

Our research and design team, which is led by our Assistant Heads of Curriculum...this team looks at how we should be moving forward as a school, what does the research say, what kind of professional development do our teachers need, and, what's the next step to take us forward? Before I came to this school, a couple of years before, that group looked at what's happening in the research. And definitely we're seeing a lot more anxiety in schools; we're seeing children that are having more difficulty and more stress. So, they looked at what type of program could we create within the school that would really be something that would help our students. They came up with what's called the "Core Five"—*core* meaning it's the core of the person and "five" meaning it's focusing on five different areas. So far, we've only developed four. For example, the first one is all about yourself as a person: "intrapersonal." From kindergarten to grade eleven they would discuss that core, but, of course, it would be a progression of learning throughout as to *what* they might discuss. The second core is "interpersonal"—the interpersonal piece being how I am in relationship with relating to somebody else. The third core is all about perseverance and persistence and the importance of that. The fourth one is about realistic optimism. How can we be realistic, but still optimistic? How we can instill that growth mindset? The fifth core hasn't been developed yet, but what we're thinking about is how we action these other four cores—and that, we believe, is the leadership piece. The teachers have worked in teams and have currently designed three of four lessons and each are appropriate for the age and grade they teach. By having our teachers create these lessons over time, they have internalized them, and can then apply them in every aspect of school life.



**Sharon Klein** is a lifelong learner who is passionate about the educational experience at St. George's School of Montreal. As Head of School, she is an advocate for progressive and research-based education. She is widely respected as a collaborative leader and is dedicated to the St. George's individualized approach to teaching and learning. In alignment with the School's mission and vision, Sharon is spearheading a school-wide sustainability initiative that calls faculty, staff, and students to be engaged and responsible citizens of the Earth, and to model a fully sustainable environment within the school. She is also dedicated to fostering the continued growth of the School's Centre for Learning Enrichment into a preeminent resource for best practices in learning.



# Bringing Mindfulness to the K-6 Classroom

Barbara Kurtzman

## Abstract

In this interview, elementary school teacher and mindfulness coach Barbara Kurtzman discusses how she brought mindfulness in the class, starting in Cycle 1 and then with the whole elementary school. Her interest in mindfulness began as a personal journey which she wanted to share with her students. She explains that taking only a few minutes a day helps her and her students to be more focused on the task at hand. She has found that her students also use mindfulness outside of her classroom. She finishes by giving advice to teachers who are interested in including mindfulness in their classrooms.

*How would you define the mindfulness practice that you use in your classroom?*

It's a great question because there's so many ways to define "mindfulness" and for me I really had to think about that question when I was bringing it into the classroom. I really wanted students to stop and breathe. And when I asked people around me, "When was the last time you took a breath?" (not the students themselves, but just people in my own world), they would stop and look at me: *What a strange question. We're breathing now, we breathe all the time...of course, we breathe.* But I said, "When was the last time you stopped and you consciously took a breath?"

I started off this practice doing yoga with my students. So about four years ago I would use yoga in the classroom, where we would push all the desks aside and we would find 15-20 minutes to do yoga. I realized that there was something that wasn't going right with that. And, in fact, I went to get trained in teaching yoga because I see myself as a teacher of reading, writing, math, problem solving, critical thinking...how was I going to justify that I could teach yoga? After being trained in yoga for children—which is different than doing it with adults—I realized that it was the end of a yoga practice, which is what I wanted to bring to my students. And like any other subject that I'd been asked to teach—reading, writing, any other content—I realized I had to immerse them in the text, and the text was to breathe and to be conscious of breathing.

And that's basically what we do. So once a day, and I take the opportunity after lunch, after recess, when I meet them downstairs in a very loud crowded locker room, all I say to my afternoon students is: "Go upstairs, go in your mindful position." And then I'm the last one to come into the room. And I have to tell you that I do it as much for them as I do for myself because these children have been in working with their French teacher all morning and then they come to me in the afternoon. They have to "perform" as they did in the morning and children learn differently at different times. We take the time—we stop consciously—and we go through a mindful practice that I can explain to you more about what it exactly looks like and sounds like.

*How did you explain to the children the need to be mindful of their breathing?*

I didn't. I showed them instead of telling them. On the very first day, day one, they walked into class and I said, "Girls, we're going to do mindfulness" and they did have some experience last year in kindergarten. Last year I initiated what was called the "30-day mindful journey" and it happened with the whole school. Every child from kindergarten to grade six for the month of November...their teachers committed to one minute of stopping to breathe. We talked about what does it mean to be present and what does it mean to be grounded and we sort of defined some of the words that are used around mindfulness. We called it our mindfulness practice and it went on from the first of November to the 30<sup>th</sup> of November.

This year, when I had those same kids in grade one, the very first day, I said, "We're going to continue your mindful practice, but we're going to commit to it every day." I had six children that said, "I don't want to." I do it with my French Grade 1 colleague—it goes on in French as it does in English—and she looked at me and said, "What are we going to do?" And I said: "We're going to go on. We just show them what to do. We just demonstrate." I keep my eyes closed during it, so I didn't see what was going on, but that's part of being mindful: You hear the sounds around you, you acknowledge them, but you continue staying present in the moment. It's like magic—it reminds me of teaching reading in grade one. They come in and they're so excited to read, but they're scared. They're good storytellers, but reading the words on the page is so foreign to them. I think they come into grade one...they understand that letters make sounds, sounds make words, and words make sentences, but they haven't practiced it.

Mindfulness is just another practice and the results are incredible. It doesn't take long where you start seeing it and it doesn't happen every day. I tell the girls that too. Some days when you do your mindfulness practice you'll feel better than other days. Some days you really get the results right away and other days you have too many things on your mind so you can't really become mindful. But I tell them not to empty their minds, just to turn inward and stay present and in the moment and focused during the time of mindfulness. They still think it's one-minute long, but it's gone to about three or four. I don't take charge of when it ends—I've relinquished that leadership to the others.

Every week a new child is a mindful leader and they have a routine that they do with a rain stick and chimes—so, they in fact will end the session. If it rings too fast, I don't say anything...I just go with it. But I had to model it and when I was ready to have that gradual release of responsibility, we have it now as a class job. It's a very popular class job and it goes on for a week so children have that opportunity to be that mindful leader—and they are leaders because my hope and prayer is that, like I do lifelong learners for reading, I'm hopeful that they take this practice with them into the other grades. It's not part of everyone's curriculum—it is part of my curriculum, but it doesn't stop me from doing everything else...it's three minutes in a day. When I hear people say, "I don't have time," that's the part that makes me feel sad. I have said to my students: "In the future if you go into a situation where the person who is in charge says, 'there is no time' you can do it yourself. No one's going to know you're doing it. You're not tuning out; you're tuning inward." My hope and prayer is that they take this practice with them forever.

The feedback I'm getting from parents is really interesting. I was afraid of parents a little bit because, like with anything else (like when that math program "Défi Math – Challenging Math" came into our curriculum) because parents weren't used to learning that way. I didn't want them to think that children were coming home and bringing a religious practice—there's absolutely no religion that I bring to this practice whatsoever. They've learned terms like *Namaste*, which means "may the light that shines inside of me shine onto you." And they use that, but it's not a prayer—it's just a way to close the practice. Parents are amazed at how children have been coming home and saying: "Can we do it as a family?"

Two things have sort of prompted it. This is a mind jar and every child made one this year in my class. It's just a symbolic representation of our mind. When children are coming upstairs to my classroom after recess and lunch and conflict resolution (things that have been solved and things that haven't been solved), our minds are like this. You shake up your mind jar and you put it in front of you, and it takes about a minute...we've timed it. We had to figure out the scientific recipe of different materials to put in...it takes about a minute for the sparkles to completely settle down. It's a symbolic representation of our minds and our brains. They brought that home, so that was kind of the text that went home with each child. Every child leaves it somewhere in their home and they use it.

*When you first start with the children, how do you explain to them the importance of being grounded and turning inward? What do you tell them?*

There is great literature and great illustrated picture books that are out there. I started off beginning the year reading them. For instance, one is called, "What Does It Mean to Be Present?" The way it's written in the book and it's written for that audience...children between the ages of...they really associate with it. They really start learning the vocabulary and they see a little girl in the story or a little boy who is modelling mindfulness. There is one book called, "The Moody Cow That Meditates," and in fact inside that book is a recipe for the mind jar. They start associating and relating to the text and they're making that text-to-self connection. It's not just me that says, "This is what it means." I use illustrated picture books a lot in my classroom—that's how I teach. It's not a foreign thing for me to teach them something through a text. Then, of course, they want to bring the books home—and they're just adorable, there's an excellent collection of books, written for children. I've read many and, like any other book, I won't read a book to my students that I haven't read myself first.

*You said you've seen so many interesting results. What are they, tangibly?*

I've been teaching for over 25 years and I've seen the complexity of students. They come in with so much, I'm going to call it "baggage," but it's not a negative thing. They come in also very programmed. Their days are programmed. They come to school from 8:00 until 3:00, and then after school they have extracurricular activities like ballet, jazz, sports, and they may not get home until the evening. They almost don't know what to do with their time when they have it. They almost look to me to feed them: "What's next?" And that has decreased so much because I see them even when they're doing their work,

they're able to focus on what's in front of them. And sometimes I'll just say to them something like, "Are you focused?" and the word *focus* means something to them. I say to them: "Are you being mindful; are you in the moment?" Sometimes they'll come up and they'll ask me a question and I'll say, "Does that have anything to do with what we're doing right now? Are we being present?"

The words start to really mean something to them individually and the amount of time that these six-year-olds are able to focus on a task is incredible. And I've seen an increase from the beginning. They're leaving nap time in kindergarten. So, in fact, that is their mindful time. But the difference between nap time and mindfulness is that this is being labeled, and we talk and it's conscious. They know why they're doing it. I don't know if nap time is explained. They stop doing nap time when they're old enough, but I hope they never stop taking time to be mindful. I do some talking during it sometimes, my own talking, and I'm trying to teach them compassion and gratitude through mindfulness.

They are very respectful in this classroom. This classroom is a safe zone. They know when they walk in there's certain expectations and respect is number one, but I want to see it outside the classroom. I need to see that the transfer of knowledge is happening not just in this safe space, but in others. So sometimes I have to wait and I have to be patient. I may not see a child benefitting immediately in front of me. I see it, but the real benefit might happen years later. I have to just be patient and know that I'm giving them a skill and for those children who didn't want to do it on day one, they're my best practitioners.

*Why do you think that is so?*

Because they feel it. They don't have to be told that it's working; they feel it from inside out. And it's that Namaste, that light that shines, from the inside out. I wasn't always a mindful person. I only started to practice mindfulness myself around five years ago and I saw what it was doing to me. So, I was able to bring that. I was also someone who read very late in life; I learned to read not in grade one and not in grade two. I think that the type of teacher I am is reflected in my own personal learning to read. I think I bring the same thing to the mindfulness practice. I share that passion and I model it day after day. I can walk into their class now when they're in grade three and all I have to say is the word "mindful" to them and I see their whole body changes. I'll put my hand on their shoulder and say, "Take a deep breath." I'll see kids in the hall looking like their anxiety level has just skyrocketed and I'll say to them, "Take a breath with me." And I'll breathe in and let it out. Two breaths can take them through any task. It was really interesting, I asked my students this week about when do they use mindfulness outside my classroom and one little girl said, "Oh, right before dictée" (dictée is their French spelling test). We have a signal in the classroom where they go like this [pats the left side of her chest] if they had the same answer so they don't feel badly if everyone is raising their hand and you can only pick one child. So they were all going like this [pats the left side of her chest], "I agree, I agree." So I said, "What do you do?" And she said, "I just take two really deep breaths and then it just settles me down and I can focus on my dictée." And I say, "What happens?" "Oh, I do really well." So, they're making those connections without me having to make it for them.

*What do you think mindfulness practice has done for your teaching?*

I've watched kids and been in the classroom for so many years. I have an appreciation for them that has reminded me of the importance of being patient. I believe I've become a much more patient person. I used to always want to "infect" as many people as I could: "What I'm doing has to be done by everybody else." I've stepped back from that and what I've said is what's really important is what's going on today, in this classroom, with the students and I can't be responsible for every teacher in the province. And, I can't be responsible for every child in the province. It really hit me hard last year when I started that month of mindfulness. I reached out to schools around the world and 12 schools joined us for this mindful journey. I was so busy helping everyone around me being mindful, I forgot how important it is to be mindful myself. And I suffered. I really had to regroup and take a step back and say, "How is this possible? I'm the new mindful guru and everyone is counting on me to help them, why isn't it working with me?" I had to think really hard and I came to terms with the fact that I'm to take care of me and if I'm healthy, my students will be healthy.

We have to know that as teachers that if we're passionate, they become passionate. And not by telling them to be passionate, but by showing them. And even with writing, it's "show, don't tell." I can stand up and do mini-lesson after mini-lesson and say, "Why aren't they putting punctuation at the end of sentence? I taught them how, why aren't they doing it?" It's that same model, that same philosophy; it's just another skill. Kids today just need it more and more. The research and statistics are showing that. We can't stop technology; we can't slow it down. It's coming at our students at a very fast pace and technology is just one way that they're getting information from. It's coming from themselves; it's coming from their parents. We want children to succeed and we want them to be the best they can be. I have a saying: "Practice makes it, not perfect, but practice makes it permanent." And that's what we want to make sure.

*What would you suggest other teachers should do if they are interested in pursuing mindfulness practices in their classroom?*

They need to start themselves. How do we teach writing? By practicing to write. Start off with one minute a day. That's all you start with. Don't take on something bigger because we're not going to succeed. We all have our New Year's resolutions—I'm going to exercise five days a week! [We don't] exercise five days a week and then we don't do it and we stop. Say, "I'm going to take one minute out of my day, consciously and practice mindfulness." You will see it happens so quickly. The results are fast: you don't have to go to the gym for months to see that weight drop. Promise yourself, say to yourself: "It will help you and it will help your students." If a teacher is feeling well, her students are going to feed off of that. We can't guarantee that every child is going to get healthier and feel well if they practice mindfulness, but I've never seen anything where the results happen so quickly. But it has to continue. After the 30 days of the journey, it had to go on, and in my life it did. I'm really fortunate too because I was sitting at a ped day last year in August, we had a speaker and we sat in a three-hour workshop on meditation. In August! This was tough for some, as they had never experienced meditation before. I, on the other hand

was like, “Oh my god, I’m still on vacation!” I practiced it all summer. The presenter had a screen up about the 30-day “Movember,” where men grow beards, and I said to my colleague who is a phys. ed. teacher, “Let’s do a mindful challenge with our Cycle One kids.” She said, “Barbara, I love it!” We walked in a Cycle One meeting right after and we decided to present it to the Cycle One team and everybody said “yes,” which to me was the first time. It was a unanimous decision which to me, I couldn’t ignore that. I’m very fortunate that I work with colleagues that, although I have many things that I’m passionate about, they respect me highly when I bring something up that, I think, affected them too. Even though that ped day was hard, it has to be hard for it to be meaningful. I really think that was the trigger. It’s part of one of our pillars, mental health and well-being, but to see it in action was something else.



[Click here for interview with two students at The Study School.](#)

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**Barbara Kurtzman** has been a Grade 1 teacher at The Study School in Montreal for over 25 years. Most recently, she was accepted in McGill's Masters program in the department of Integrated Studies, where she continues to grow professionally and personally. She has been involved in many wonderful initiatives and continues to share her passion with her students, colleagues and parents. She believes some of the interesting aspects of teaching are making sure her students feel like they are part of a community of learners, where it is safe to take risks, and to be grateful for each day.



Disha De

**Disha** is a wonderful writer. She loves cats, big and small cats. She loves the colour blue, using her iPad, and watching television. She is a girl with a lot of information. She has a great vocabulary and loves to share her ideas with others. Disha is the kind of girl that never gives up!

by: Catherine



Catherine Latreille

**Catherine** loves to read. I would say she is a bookworm. She is also good at Math and likes to solve challenging math problems. Catherine has a lot of information that she likes to share with her classmates and teachers. Catherine is also an amazing friend.

by: Disha De



# Student Health and Well-Being in Indigenous Communities: “No One Is Healed Until Everyone Is Healed”

Maggie MacDonnell

## Abstract

In this interview, Maggie MacDonnell, recipient of the 2017 Global Teacher Prize, discusses how growing up near a First Nations reserve in Nova Scotia opened her eyes to inequalities between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada. She talks about the influence of Moses Coady, who instilled in her an appreciation for co-operative development, and T’hohahoken Michael Doxtater, an Indigenous scholar at McGill University, whose message, “No one is healed until everyone is healed,” she did not fully appreciate until she began working in the Inuit village of Salluit. She describes the life situation of the youth living in this kind of closed community where addiction and violence often become part of their everyday experience. Her interventions with this group of at-risk youth have helped decrease the school drop-out rate, improve students’ work and social skills, and raise awareness about suicide prevention. She concludes by giving advice to teachers who may be interested in working with students in remote communities.

*Can you talk about your life and educational experiences which you feel have contributed to your strong commitment to the health and well-being of youth in the northern-most towns in Quebec?*

I grew up in a very small rural community called Afton, located in Nova Scotia near Antigonish. I grew up quite close to a First Nations reserve. As well, I went to school with kids from that reserve: we went to a mixed school together. From an early age, just sharing a school with them and being physically close to their reserve, I understood that there were some inherent inequalities that existed between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. I was raised with certain cues or commentary or education from my parents to kind of make sure that my eyes were opened to those inequalities, but also with a lot of compassion as well.

My mother is also from a very small community called Margaree, located on the island of Cape Breton in Nova Scotia. It’s famous for having an incredible adult educator called Dr. Moses Coady, who really integrated education with community development for rural communities. Margaree is a community that is very much strengthened by collective values, and my mom passed that down to me in many senses...while going to elementary, junior high, and high school, that was really important to me in my lifestyle.

Academically, I usually did quite well in school. I really enjoyed school because it was kind of a logical environment as compared to life. School seemed a little bit more stable—if you worked hard, you could get a better grade and better feedback. Sometimes life is not always that clear cut at all, depending on

people's personal situations or the unfair inequities that they're born into. I enjoyed school a lot and really enjoyed the extracurriculars as well as physical education and physical activities. I was very much involved in that side of the school life and I also think my parents were seeing the value in that and they put in a lot of time driving me to practices. Again, we lived in a rural area, so you're very dependent upon transportation to get around or access services when you grow up in that type of environment. I am thankful to my teachers in those early years who invested so much of their personal time in ensuring we had these quality opportunities.

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[After completing my master's degree], I was accepted to be a Jeanne Sauvé fellow. I recall it sort of like an incubator for young international leadership. Fourteen youth leaders from around the world came together for a residential fellowship. We lived in a beautiful house on Doctor Penfield; it was sort of a residential, academic, and leadership experience program for 14 selected scholars from all over the world. I lived there with people from Rwanda, Israel, South Africa, another colleague from Nova Scotia, people from Toronto, Montreal, England, Cuba. What a rich experience that was! We lived together and were able to take courses at McGill University. [I remember taking a course given by T'hohahoken Michael Doxtater] ... that was the first time I was ever able to take a course offered by an Indigenous person, which impressed me so much. He was [an Indigenous] scholar and taught out of the Faculty of Education at McGill. He would repeatedly state throughout his classes this one quote which I'll never forget: "No one is healed until everyone is healed." That quote really stayed in my mind, but then I'll refer back to it later. I don't think I knew quite what it meant when I was in the classroom, but I understood later when I got to a closed community in Salluit...how much that quote was so very true.

I finished my time at McGill and got involved in lots of different things. I did a soccer program for people who were homeless. I did really cool workshops at Kahnawake Survival School. I was involved in all sorts of things—I am too curious! I even had an interest in chocolatiering: I was looking into a social chocolate enterprise in Tanzania. I tend to be interested in learning all sorts of things—sometimes I can be a bit random to follow from the outside. I finished that time and then went off to take on a short-term contract with a fellow scholar in Goma, Congo. We were working for CARE and helping them develop their strategic plan. I brought a feminist and post-colonial lens, which I gained from the University of Toronto, and also a focus on young people, which has sort of always been there. We did some really fascinating research work there. Just as I was about to finish up, my sister, who at the time was a social worker in Salluit, sent me a message to say that they were still looking for a teacher. That was October...they're having a hard time hiring one...reflective of how difficult it is to recruit staff to come work in Indigenous communities. She got in touch with the principal who got in touch with me. We did a Skype interview—somehow that must have been magical for the Internet to work all the way up in Salluit and all the way in Goma on that same day. I sat outside under a palm tree on a picnic table and did the interview, and lo and behold the next day they offered me a job. [So], I went up to Salluit.

People asked me why I wanted to work in an Indigenous community. To me, I just kind of thought that's a pretty logical step considering I'd always been so interested in community development, international

development, etc. These issues you can find in any community, but particularly in Canada I think they're very salient in Indigenous communities. I was hopeful that perhaps some of my previous education and my experiences could sharpen my work or make my work effective in that context. But, honestly, I went in very humble of the history that existed, the colonial history between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. I knew it would be very challenging and, honestly, I thought this might be an incredibly privileged experience as a non-Indigenous white Canadian to be able to go and live there and at least learn myself. First, as a Canadian, I felt I like I sort of had a moral responsibility to learn first-hand. Again, I'm privileged enough to be able to have these degrees behind my belt that get me professional positions that I can go and live in these communities and learn first-hand, but I really do enjoy immersing myself in their cross-cultural environment. I do specifically seek them out.

*What are the major issues that youth and others face in Salluit and beyond?*

The Inuit, who are local people, face the challenges related to inter-generational trauma and we see them carry that baggage in on their shoulders every day. To help me, some of the inter-generational traumas, in case your audience is not as familiar with them—in terms of how the Inuit have been affected by colonization—includes, but is not limited to, the Residential School experience, which I'm sure you as academics know, probably quite familiar with, that children were taken from homes, forcibly removed from the family structure, brought thousands of miles away, kept for long periods of time, made to feel ashamed of their culture, abused... They're still finding, unfortunately, graveyards of Indigenous kids at these former residential schools. That's a huge trauma that would have affected the communities. On top of that, we can also look at forced relocation or forced resettlement. At the time in terms of Canada and the colonial desire for Arctic sovereignty, the Inuit were very much pressured to give up a traditional nomadic, semi-nomadic, or seasonally nomadic lifestyle...to settle permanently in one area and were promised adequate housing and services in return for sort of giving up that style of life. And, of course, to ensure Arctic sovereignty access to mineral wealth and all the benefits that come to Canada for having such a large land mass in their nation's borders. Some families were forced and they were split up, and they were sent to live in some places that were quite harsh and not very ideal for actual settling.

We can also talk about tuberculosis, a disease that was unknown to them brought in by European Canadians and had a huge devastating effect on the communities. I have heard stats say as many as one out of four people were living with tuberculosis, and had to be removed for treatment for years at a time because, again, no treatment was provided. And, again, to this date, we still have tuberculosis, sadly, alive and vibrant in these Inuit communities that I've been in. As an example in the community of Salluit, just recently, perhaps less than two years ago, there was as many as 30 people who were living with active tuberculosis, including some of our students. This is not what we think of when we think of Canadian healthcare, Canadian issues that Canadians are facing. I'll speak on this later—but on top of the major traumas there are decades of underfunding for Indigenous communities. This further complicated everything. The housing crisis is an obvious example.

One of the biggest inter-generational traumas was the dog slaughter. Sled dogs were of immense importance to the Inuit. They not only represented transportation—they represented hunting, access to food, how to safely navigate the land. When you're with a dog team you can still get home after a blizzard—the dogs know their way home. A skidoo doesn't know its way home; a skidoo will break down on the land. A skidoo is not very reliable. I've heard elders talk about how the dogs were like family members to them...the puppies of certain dogs that belonged to their grandfather...there is a real close connection...that they were family members...and these dogs knew where a certain elder loved to stop and have tea on his fishing trips. That was the closeness of the relationship they had with these animals. When the RCMP actually went on to conduct the dog slaughter, this had a tremendously devastating effect on the community. I've heard first-hand, elders say to me...there is this one elder who was taken away to a Residential School who lost her mother to tuberculosis and she returned to find her father the day he came home and found his dogs slaughtered. He had been through how many traumas, and she said: "That's the day he started to drink." And that's the day that alcohol and addiction entered her family.

This is what young people are born into: they're dealing with these inter-generational traumas, further complicated by decades of underfunding. Currently, in Nunavik, they are short over 1,000 housing units according to a Senate report. What I'd like to try share with people who haven't yet had the privilege like I have of living here, when I say there's not enough units, I mean there's really no place to rent. The only reason I have a place to stay is because my employer provides me with a house. Imagine if all the school boards across Canada had to provide housing for their teachers, how much more complicated...how much more expensive their operating budgets would be. There literally [are] no empty units, no empty housing to just go rent. A lot of people I know in Salluit stay on waiting lists for social housing for over a decade, for 15 years. By this time, they're mature...they're in their late 30s...they've had one, two, three kids...and they're still having to live under the roof of their parents in a very overcrowded, overrun house that may also be very likely experiencing addiction, and potentially even other levels of abuse, domestic violence or things like that.

What this can look like in terms of the student is that it's very common for my students to sleep in the living room. You sleep in a living room and there's 14 people in a three-bedroom house...you probably don't get to go to bed at nine o'clock or ten o'clock...maybe you go to bed at two in the morning, three in the morning, whenever the TV goes off or the video games go off or whenever the last person gets home or things like that. Even the idea that our students don't even necessarily have the privilege of coming to school well rested is an issue we see within our students as well.

At the Kativik School Board, they've been giving us training on what they call "The Compassionate-Based Schools Approach," and what they try to teach us, so we know as teachers, is that many of our students are coming to school with these traumas and that really affects their brains. Often, young people might be in what we call kind of a "state of fright or flight." When they're in that high-stressed or high-trauma state, it's very difficult for their brains to be able to focus, connect, to think about executive functioning and tasks like that. As teachers, we really need to think about how we create a safe and secure

environment within our classrooms, within our school. How do we create routines that can help calm them from whatever baggage they might be bringing from the night before?

I’ll also throw in food insecurity. I didn’t mention that. Recent stats show that food insecurity in the North where I live in Nunavik is at 52%. Other research estimates it to be as high as an alarming 70%. Again, not a statistic most Canadians would associate with their own country. That’s an issue we’re facing. As a school, all of this is going to come into the classroom—there’s no way for it not to.

*Tell us some of the ways you’ve been able to turn students away from these problems and engage them in finding solutions?*

I guess there’s sort of two parts to that answer. One part is I had to come in and sort of understand myself what some of the issues were and what were some of the barriers I could actually maybe have an impact on. At the time when I got there I was teaching a Life Skills program and it was coed on paper, so boys and girls, but it mainly just had boys sign up. And I was teaching a program for youth who were considered the most at risk, but still engaged in the school population. By this I mean they were dropouts who I had to recruit to come back to school or kids who were identified as “about to drop out,” very poor attendance, etc. A lot of these kids though did have some pretty harsh reputations: they were known as bullies, vandals in the community; they might have come from very unstable families. A lot of them were smoking cigarettes at a very young age, had regular drug use as well; some of them had criminal activities. It was very difficult with those very strong male characters in my class at the time to also bring in girls. It took me a few months, but I realized that that was a major barrier excluding girls: the girls don’t want to come into the class with these male students; they did not necessarily feel safe around them...so it’s kind of this invisible population that we’re not reaching. We think we’re targeting the dropouts, but we’re actually just targeting the boys, and there isn’t something similar for girls. I just don’t think at that point, considering the nature of the gender relationships in the community, considering that girls do experience a lot of sexual harassment and violence, they necessarily felt safe to enter a life skills program, predominantly with a lot of male students.

I was able to convince my principal and the school board to create a whole other program just for girls. Part of my approach was what I needed to make a structural change. We had to create a whole other program...we needed another resource in here. By the time I was in my second and a half year in the community, we had both a boys-only program and a girls-only program. By the way, I named some rough things that those boys had been through...[but] I also had a very close relationship with them and I did projects with them that I’m incredibly proud of. And that’s where that comment from McGill professor [T’hoahoken Michael Doxtater], “No one is healed until everyone is healed,” really resonated a lot with me because I saw how important every single person was in a closed community. Just as much as I have a strong desire to work with girls, especially those at disadvantage—I think working with young males is equally as important in restoring healthy and balanced gender relations and norms.

I tried to do programming that would connect more to [the girls'] needs or interests. Part of it was work placement, so they're learning employment skills. I actually helped them get jobs in the mornings where they would earn money. We would go there as a group, so they had social support. I was there with them, to help them if issues came up with their supervisor or fellow colleagues—I could help navigate that. I could help them gain the skills they needed for their specific employment. Most of them ended up working at the day care. That was really powerful for them too. I think that was really transformative for my students to be suddenly in a situation where their skill set could grow easily and was of immediate intangible value.

We also did things like a community kitchen...we would make special meals just for elders. There is a local activist in our community who's very prominent at the regional level. Her name is Annie Alaku—she's an elder, she's a healer, and she's a survivor herself of sexual violence. We would work with her on different programs that she was giving to help prevent more sexual violence. Here are these young girls, 13 to 18, and we found sometimes as young as 11...they're getting to work with this elder...gaining a lot of practical real-life experience...and what I began to call, "acts of kindness" in the community.

We also initiated and ran a program called "Students feeding Students." Food insecurity is a huge issue in Nunavik, and access to healthy food is really expensive and unaffordable for many. So we found funding for my students to make healthy nutritious snacks for the entire student population every day. We had this really fun smoothie bike that we would use—basically a bike with a blender—and we would "pedal" smoothies for all the students. It was fun, healthy, nutritious, and an important act of service for my students.

*How can health and well-being be promoted more universally in Quebec's remote communities?*

More funding needs to be released for it. There is such a strong, very vibrant underground drug economy in these communities. Youth are exposed to that at a very tender age in their development. I think if you want to attract young people to make different choices, you really have to put some funding behind it. Again, I don't know how to talk public health numbers and what's substantial and what's not, but if I look at the fitness centre we created in Salluit, that was \$100,000 initially and it's been going on for five years now. Right now, that is pro-rated to \$20,000 a year. It provides employment for young people. It's inspired young people to think about personal training or kinesiology as a career, which they hadn't thought of before. It's helped two students that I know lose so much weight that they're no longer at risk of diabetes ... and I would have considered them to be pre-diabetic when they first started going. I have over 20 youth who can easily run 10-km races, and six runners who have competed and finished a half-marathon, all in their teenage years. Some have quit smoking, and returned to school, and improved their sleeping habits because of the running program. My runners have been recognized and become Healthy Role Models for the region—inspiring other kids to run, be active, make healthy food choices, decrease smoking, etc. I think this is an excellent return on a \$100,000 investment. There needs to be a lot more investment into recreation generally in remote areas and especially in the North. I think

that area is very much under-funded...and recreation you have to fund it to compete enough with the addiction economy.

I don't think I spoke about it directly, but Nunavik is [experiencing] a unique suicide crisis and we've lost a lot of young people to suicide. One thing my runners have told me...is that the cultivation of that physically active lifestyle is actually building a lot of resilience within them and it becomes a coping strategy. Sometimes when they're facing their own suicidal thoughts—and again, so many of our young people have witnessed and lost multiple people to suicide. So many of our young people in this region are having their own thoughts of suicide. When they're in that space of having suicidal thoughts, those that have a healthy coping strategy—such as running, playing soccer, participating in snow shoe, cross-country skiing, going for a bike ride, going for a walk, playing traditional Inuit games, coming to the fitness centre—that's all a healthy coping strategy—it helps them. And it connects them to other youth also making healthy choices. You have social support and this is so crucial. Because one thing I'll say for teenagers here in Nunavik who choose to be healthy, it's very lonely. You don't have a lot of friends right away. Most of your friends are smoking pot, drinking, partying, etc. even from the tender age of 12 or less. By creating these teens' clubs, physical places like recreation centres where young people can come, those that are choosing to live a drug-free lifestyle or largely a drug-free lifestyle, they can connect with other young people and they can support each other there. And the combination of both having that direct coping strategy through physical activity and having the social support of other young people is actually turned into suicide prevention.

*To sum up, what suggestions do you have for aspiring teachers who wish to prepare themselves for teaching and advocating for students in remote communities?*

You always have to start with yourself and, as much as possible, try to educate yourself to the different histories that might be in these remote places, especially if you're not an insider, you're coming in as an outsider. I think it's really important to educate yourself. One of the best lessons I learned through the Coady Institute was a reminder that we have two eyes, two ears, and one mouth. There is a lot of information we can take in before we make any statements or judgments or proclamations, etc. There is a lot to observe, to witness, and to listen to before you necessarily need to be the expert or jump to definitive conclusions. Sometimes I feel not in the right position being seen as a spokesperson for this area as well. I didn't grow up here. I'm still learning all the layers of the iceberg that are here. But that's a very important thing you need to do first, and I think particularly important in the Canadian context if we're talking about Indigenous communities because I think they're often so racially profiled in a negative light. People really need to unlearn *that* history and *that* profiling and reeducate themselves into a more appropriate, truthful, genuine history of what Indigenous people have been overcoming in Canada.



**Maggie MacDonnell** grew up in rural Nova Scotia and after completing her Bachelor's degree, spent five years volunteering and working in sub-Saharan Africa, largely in the field of HIV/AIDS prevention. After completing her Master's degree, she found her country was beginning to wake up to the decades of abuse that Canadian Indigenous people have lived through, including assaults on the environment and enormous economic and social inequality. As such, she sought out opportunities to learn more about this history, while teaching in an Indigenous community in Canada. For the last seven years she has been a teacher in a fly-in Inuit village called Salluit, nestled in the Canadian Arctic. This is home to the second northernmost Inuit community in Quebec, with a population of just over 1,400—it cannot be reached by road, only by air. In winter temperatures reach minus 50C. The region and the community have been gripped by a suicide crisis. At one point in this close-knit village, they lost 10 youth to suicide in a span of just two years.

# Sound, Smart, and Safe: A Plea for Teaching Good Digital Hygiene

Alissa Sklar

## Abstract

The concept of “digital hygiene” addresses the way digital technology can be integrated into our lives in safe, healthy, responsible, and respectful ways. Teaching kids about digital hygiene requires parents to be confident about their role as models and guides for the use of these devices, which is difficult when adults feel—often quite justifiably—that their children’s tech skills outpace their own. This commentary addresses the need for broadening the notion of digital hygiene with input from kids and teens, then educating and supporting parents (and educators) in its application.

When my twin daughters started high school six years ago, the number of digital devices in our household multiplied. Suddenly there were iPads for classroom use and smartphones in their purses, and the devices began to take over our lives. It got harder and harder to get them off their screens, and more difficult to know where homework ended and FaceTime, Instagram, and Netflix began. As they and their friends acquired these digital tools, their social lives became almost completely mediated by apps and screens of various sizes, and we worried about the ways it was changing their habits and personalities. Their bedtimes stretched later and later. Their voracious reading habits ground nearly to a halt. They spent less time outside. Their heads were always down, eyes focused on a screen; their spoken responses to questions became distracted and disengaged.

Now any parent of teenagers knows some of these behaviours are at least partly a consequence of contemporary adolescence, but it was clear that physiological changes couldn’t explain them all. Unable to draw on models from our own pre-Internet adolescence, my husband and I began to gradually develop and implement a set of new rules and guidelines about how the devices could and should be used to keep their bodies, minds, privacy, and devices safe, a set of practices we began to refer to as “digital hygiene.”

Our family-oriented version of digital hygiene looked like this: Every night before bedtime, I’d insist they remove their devices from their bedrooms and plug them into a charging station set up in the hallway. Until they demonstrated good judgment and earned their privacy in increments, they needed to share usernames and passwords to all accounts and devices with me and their dad. All smartphones were to be set to silent and kept away from the dinner table. Guidelines were established for keeping passwords private, and privacy levels on their accounts set to the highest degree. New rules needed to be developed all the time, and were generally hashed out around the dinner table, with the reluctant consent of our kids. While they didn’t like the rules, we all appreciated the spirited critical thinking and debates around them. I learned a lot about how these tools fit into their lives, and these conversations offered (and continue to offer) golden opportunities to discuss our concerns and share ideas.

As my kids slowly adjusted to the new rules (albeit with considerable grumbling and protest), I continued researching this emerging set of best practices. I discovered the notion of digital hygiene wasn't my invention at all. The origins of the concept are a bit murky, with the earliest reference being a blog launched in November 2010 (Rodrigues, 2010), focused on best practices for keeping digital devices in good order and protecting them from malware, as well as online productivity and netiquette tips. The CyborgAnthropology.com wiki defines the term as the "cleanliness or uncleanliness of one's digital habitat" (Case, 2012).

As a parent of three teens and a writer and educator on the subjects of digital technology, education, and parenting, I'd argue that we can greatly and expand upon the concept of digital hygiene, and then actively teach it to our kids at home and in schools. This is reinforced in the writings and techniques of the Digital Citizenship Program (Ribble & Bailey, 2007a), a nine-component look at teaching about these tools that can easily accommodate the thinking behind a digital hygiene best practices. Ribble and Bailey have greatly expanded upon their original program on their website, DigitalCitizenship.net, and it's a resource I frequently allude to in my work with parents, teachers, and students. For many, it's a first introduction to the idea that teaching about digital tech is about so much more than learning how to put together a great PowerPoint presentation or code a website; it's fundamentally about using these powerful communication tools safely, and with respect and civility towards others.

Every one of their nine elements addresses different perspectives on safety, security, respect, civility, privacy, and effective, productive, and creative use of digital technologies. Digital Etiquette, for example, not only covers inappropriate use, but also encompasses effective ways to write an email (is "reply all" always necessary?), respect content shared in confidence by others, and addressing authority figures in different online formats. Ribble and Bailey's element of Digital Health & Wellness speaks to many of the concerns parents have over how screens may affect their child's vision, how earphones may cause hearing loss, and whether hours on the Internet may affect physical fitness or exacerbate stress and anxiety.

Ribble and Bailey (2007b, 2007c) offer kids' and parents' versions of a Family Contract for Digital Citizenship on their website for all parties to sign. Similar versions exist elsewhere (see the Family Online Safety Institute's Family Online Safety Contract (2017)). These are excellent blueprints for facilitating conversation in homes and in classrooms, but they aren't especially comprehensive, and they are entirely top-down in their dynamic, imposing upon kids the rules created by adults.

That doesn't have to be the case. A more balanced model for developing guidelines for digital hygiene is already in practice in some forward-thinking schools. I've written elsewhere about the innovative, student-authored digital technology policy in place at my daughters' school, Montreal's Trafalgar School for Girls, (Sklar, 2014). Developed to counter the more typical, opaquely worded policies in most schools, Trafalgar asked their students to rewrite it in their own words (as in, "Always think about the effects your words might have before you post. Imagine the person's face when they read it" (Trafalgar, 2017)). The resulting draft was circulated for feedback from teachers, school staff, and parents; each incoming class of secondary one students is invited to edit and offer feedback. It's a living document,

created by students, for students, which encourages both critical thinking in its development and buy-in from students who become de facto ambassadors among their peers for responsible behaviour online.

Any arrangement that draws kids into the conversation about best practices is likely to be more effective if it is simultaneously regarded as an opportunity for learning and communication. The problem with any kind of hygiene practice is that is based in practical, lived experiences, and is very often context dependent. Yet parents and educators tend to crave defined rules and clear directives, which isn't always possible or especially successful in achieving compliance. One of the most common set of questions I get from parents is about appropriate ages for different kinds of behaviours: what is the right age for an email account, for a first cellphone, for a Snapchat account. There is no easy answer to those questions. Although social media networks such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter require users to be 13 years old to set up an account, this is simply a matter of entering the correct year of birth during registration, and commonly circumvented by younger users who can manage the basic subtraction. The answer to questions about the right age is a complex formula each parent must derive, based on their comfort levels, family values, willingness to effectively supervise its use, level of responsibility of the child in question, and their capacity for following rules. This might be different for each child in the family.

Take the question of a first cellphone as an illustration. Getting one's own smartphone has become a right of passage for many kids, and the age of first acquisition has dropped steadily as devices become more affordable, kids' ownership of such devices has become normalized, and as parents trade up their own smartphones and pass the old ones down to their kids. The average age for an American child getting their first smartphone is now an astonishingly young 10.3 years (Influence Central, 2016); a 2014 report found 25% of Canadian fourth-graders had their own cellphone (Steeves, 2014).

Despite the fact that primary school-aged kids owning cellphones is becoming commonplace, parents express a lot of anxiety about how to handle this. During my workshops, parents confess three particular worries: that they are interfering with their child's privacy in demanding passwords or revision of texts and apps installed on the phones, that they are outclassed by their kids' superior technical abilities with such gadgets and doubt their abilities to effectively supervise their use, or that their rules for use are excessively strict.

My response to these frequently voiced concerns is to reassure parents on two fronts. The first is to remind them that freedom from parental involvement is a privilege that all children should earn through consistent, responsible behaviour. Any parent who has made the numerous mental calculations involved when their child asks to go to the playground on their own for the first time will be familiar with this process: Can the child cross the street safely? Can they keep track of time and return at the appointed hour, will they talk to strangers? Will they wander off to a friend's house without asking permission? Will they know what to do if they get hurt? Yet, for some reason, today's parents doubt their ability to make those same common-sense parental assessments with regard to digital technology.

Second, I suggest that it is totally acceptable for parents to insist that their children do not have the right to privacy from them online until they have earned it through the same consistent, responsible behaviour outlined above. This is somewhat of a shocking revelation. I reassure them that their kids must still have a right to old-fashioned, low-tech privacy, such as face-to-face conversations with friends, handwritten diaries, notes, poems, or pictures drawn on paper. The margin for error with technology is simply too high for young children, tweens, and even some young teens to handle without direct parent supervision. If kids know their moms and dads are reading their texts scrolling through their apps and emails, they will exercise far more impulse control than if they believe they have complete privacy. That alone can be the difference between a simple disagreement with friends and an online diatribe that stirs trouble across the eighth grade (and beyond). I offer one caveat here, which is that parents do not do this behind their children's backs. Ideally it will be done together, or when access is requested. The sole exceptions to this rule would be if you believe your child or another is in danger of harm.

Let's apply this to the subject of digital hygiene for kids and their cellphones. Ideally, parents would hand our children their first smartphones with the express understanding that the device belongs to mom and dad, but is a privilege granted to children based on adherence to house guidelines. They would make it clear that content and apps on the phone are not private from parents, until such privacy is earned in age-appropriate increments through responsible, consistent behaviour. They would ask that phone usage respects school rules, that the device be charged when they leave the house, that kids answer parental texts and calls in a timely manner, that the phone be plugged into a charging station outside the bedroom 30-60 minutes before bedtime. Other guidelines should be developed with their kids' input; if mealtimes are no-phone zones, parents need to respect that as well.

Digital hygiene teaches so much more than just safe, responsible use of digital tools. A parent who sits down together with their child to Google how to configure Instagram privacy settings is also modelling critical thinking, research techniques, discussing context, and involving their child. Just as important, they are providing reassuring structure to the usage of these exciting, but often bewildering tools and online spaces. Just as we teach our kids to brush their teeth, tie their shoelaces, wash their dirty dishes, and safely cross the street, today's parents and educators must address the innumerable ways technology has infiltrated every aspect of our kids' lives.

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# A Mindfulness Curriculum: High School Students' Experiences of Yoga in a Nova Scotia School

Karen A. Berezowski, Christopher M. Gilham, and Daniel B. Robinson

## Abstract

This article reports on results from a narrative inquiry into the experiences of four students who completed an elective yoga course as part of their high school program in the province of Nova Scotia, Canada. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to understand the participants' stories of their yoga experiences. Overall, students were able to express and give examples of how yoga made them feel stronger, happier, kinder, and more self-confident. We suggest that *Yoga 11* is a mindfulness curriculum, inherently. This research might be of particular interest to others similarly engaged in research related to mental health and mindfulness in education.

## Background

Yoga has been defined as a comprehensive mind-body experience that involves physical postures and movement, breathing exercises, relaxation, and meditation. These practices are meant to develop self-observation without judgment (Conboy, Noggle, Frey, Kudesia, & Khalsa, 2013). Moreover, this practice necessitates focused movement and breathing—with the ultimate goal of unifying the self at physical, emotional, cognitive, spiritual, and social levels (Conboy et al., 2013). Yoga is often described as a contemplative or mindfulness practice (Salmon, Lush, Jabonski, & Sephton, 2009; Shelov, Suchday, & Friedberg, 2009).

Among yoga's many descriptions, practices, and benefits, mindfulness is a common core concept. Mindfulness, the "intentional cultivation of moment-by-moment non-judgmental focused attention and awareness" (Meiklejohn et al., 2012, p. 291) is a purposeful part of yoga, particularly when it is viewed as a contemplative practice (Greenberg & Harris, 2012). Though additional mindfulness practices exist and have been introduced into school communities (e.g., meditation, attention training), only yoga exists in Canada as an actual curricular course. Consequently, it has great potential to reach many students over sustained periods of time.

Increasingly, educators in K-12 schools have been introducing mindfulness practices into their classrooms (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Robinson & Berezowski, 2016; Schonert-Reichl & Stewart Lawlor, 2010). Recent research on mindfulness in K-12 settings has demonstrated positive results for students (Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl & Stewart Lawlor, 2010). More specifically, research literature has revealed that there are mental and physical benefits for those (including youth) who practise yoga (Hainsworth et al., 2014; Sharma & Haider, 2013). At the same time, Canadian educators have felt ill-equipped to address mental health issues with their students (Physical and Health Education Canada,

2014a, 2014b). We suggest the ever-increasing popularity of mindfulness practices in schools could be interpreted as a response of educators to their felt need to do more for student mental health.

This paper presents the results of a recent qualitative research study on high school students' experiences with *Yoga 11*, an especially unique alternative physical education course offered within the province of Nova Scotia, Canada. To our best understanding, *Yoga 11* is the only government-approved physical education-equivalent course in K-12 school systems in Canada in which the curriculum itself *is* mindfulness. Given the research data on mindfulness in education, students within *Yoga 11* might reasonably expect to experience mental health benefits. The need to uncover and understand the potential perceived benefits provided a central impetus for this inquiry. This research might be considered by educators who similarly engage in inquiry related to the mental health benefits of contemplative or mindfulness practices in educational settings.

## The *Yoga 11* Curriculum

The intention of the *Yoga 11* curriculum is for students to develop a lifelong personal practice of yoga, to maintain physical health and wellness, and to develop healthy relationships with self and others (Nova Scotia Department of Education, 2010). The *Yoga 11* curriculum is based on three modules of study. The first module, "Proper Breathing and Asana Practice," includes seven learning outcomes and is concerned, primarily, with the demonstration of various physical postures of yoga (*asanas*). The second module, "The Origin and Philosophy of Yoga," includes three learning outcomes based on the history of the practice. Although the ancient tradition of yoga has various forms and styles, *Yoga 11* students are expected to demonstrate an understanding of *Ashtanga* yoga. *Ashtanga* yoga is described by Iyengar (2002) as an eightfold path (see Figure 1) that includes guidelines for how we treat others (*yamas*), how we treat ourselves (*niyamas*), postures (*asana*), breathwork (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and enlightenment (*samadhi*). The third module, "Integrating a Mindful Practice," also has three learning outcomes. Topics related to this module include mindful eating practices, strategies to manage emotions and stress, and the application of yoga principles outside of yoga practice.

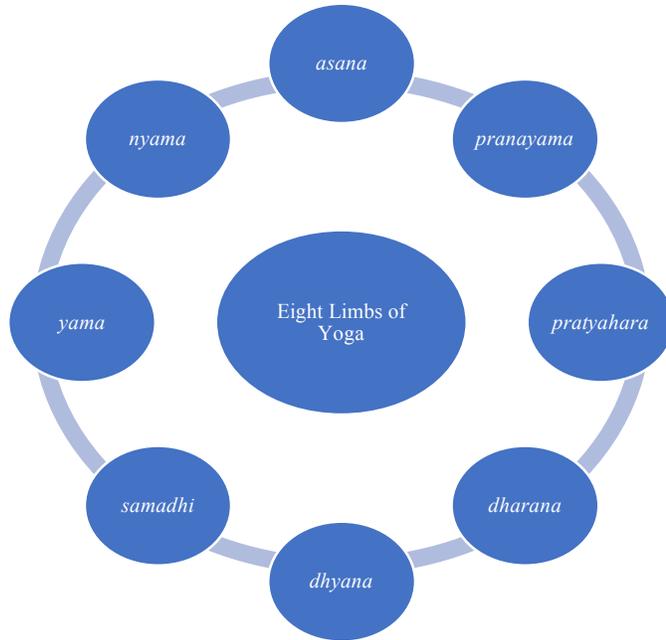


Fig. 1: Yoga's eightfold path

## Mental Health Benefits of Yoga for Youth

Chugh-Gupta, Baldassarre, and Vrkljan (2013) explained that youth anxiety is an emotional state of mind that is characterized by excessive and uncontrollable worry about typical challenges such as writing tests, public speaking, or illness. This “state” anxiety is linked to these particular obstacles and life situations (Chugh-Gupta et al., 2013). Emerging evidence has suggested yoga is beneficial as a complementary intervention to talk therapy and pharmacological intervention to this state anxiety (Chugh-Gupta et al., 2013).

Sharma and Hader (2013) pointed out that a traditional yoga practice encourages slow deep breathing techniques that are used to relax the mind and body. Symptoms associated with anxiety often include short choppy breaths and yoga has been used as a therapy to treat these warning signs of anxiety. Yoga has been used by patients looking for ways to lower their heart rates and blood pressure, without depending on drug or counselling therapy. Sharma and Hader explained that yoga could be an effective alternative for patients suffering from anxiety, as the controlled breathing techniques naturally activate the parasympathetic nervous system and a relaxation response in the body.

White (2012) investigated reducing stress in school-age girls through mindful yoga. Youth report many stressors in their lives, including homework, peer pressure, being teased, receiving poor grades, bullying, standardized testing, and perceived parental pressure. Furthermore, youth can recognize feelings associated with stress (White, 2012). White suggested that, through mindful yoga, school-age youth have the ability to cognitively appraise a stressful situation and, then, generate and evaluate an effective coping strategy.

Noggle, Steiner, Minami, and Khalsa (2012) introduced—and researched the effects of—a regular yoga program to Grade 11 and 12 physical education students from a rural high school. The students who participated in yoga indicated they had less tension and anxiety compared to the control group who had “regular” physical education. The results of this trial were used as evidence to support a larger qualitative study in the same school the following year. The researchers predicted that yoga included in the school curriculum would “improve overall student well-being by both decreasing negative and increasing positive aspects of mental health” (p. 7).

Conboy et al.’s (2013) follow-up study provided an assessment of yoga applied to a high school setting. They grouped the benefits of yoga into a number of categories: individual benefits, social benefits, athletic performance, bodily awareness, mental health, sleep, emotional regulation, stress reduction, interest in substance use, and academic performance. Notably, Conboy et al. found that mental health benefits included improved dedication and work ethic, greater respect for one’s body, improved self-image, positive changes in food choices, increased ability to relax and breathe deeply, and stress relief.

## Methodology and Methods

### Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry was chosen for conducting this qualitative research. Clandinin, Pushor, and Murray Orr (2007) explained that narrative inquiry as a methodological choice for research requires a particular kind of wakefulness and is distinct from other types of qualitative inquiry. Clandinin (2006) suggested that narrative inquiry is an old human practice. We tell and listen to stories about our living and it is how we create meaning in our lives. Clandinin et al. (2007) gave this analogy of narrative:

People shape their daily lives by stories of who they and others are and as they interpret their past in terms of these stories. Story, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their experience of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Viewed this way, narrative is the phenomenon studied in inquiry. Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. (p. 22)

Clandinin et al. (2007) outlined three commonplaces for consideration in narrative inquiry: temporality, sociality, and place. The commonplace of temporality recognizes that research captures a moment or behaviour at a specific time; people and situations are impermanent. Narrative inquirers are also concerned with the personal and social conditions of the study participants. This is addressed by the second commonplace of sociality. A relationship of trust between the inquirer and participant is essential when engaging in narrative inquiry. The third commonplace for consideration is place. Participants’ stories occur somewhere, and this place contributes to many details in participants’ stories.

Attending to the structure offered by these three commonplaces gave strength to the student stories in our study. Indeed, their stories were meaningful because of the intentional recognition of the intersection of these three commonplaces. Intentionally attuning to these three commonplaces well suits a study on

yoga as mindfulness, we offer. Noticing, or paying close attention to, what others have to say about their experiences, with a focus on the three commonplaces, is at once both a research methodology and a mindfulness exercise.

Clandinin et al. (2007) explained that narratives are portals through which a person enters and makes meaning of the world. Narrative inquiry as a research method holds interesting similarities to the ancient practice of yoga. Traditionally, yoga was taught orally, passed down through the generations from teacher to student in the form of traditional lore (Iyengar, 2002). The practice was learned by doing, and could be described as active sharing. A yoga practice could also be described as narrative in nature, as it tells the story of the practitioner. The narratives of the *Yoga 11* students were the concepts studied for this research, and narrative inquiry was the method used to gather information about the experiences. The stories of the *Yoga 11* students revealed rich details about how the practice benefitted their health. We suggest this method and methodology are congruent with *Yoga 11* as a mindfulness curriculum.

## Research Methods and Participants

Data were collected through four separate semi-structured in-depth interviews (each participant took part in one interview each). These semi-structured in-depth interviews were approximately 30 to 40 minutes in length and they occurred at the school during the lunch hour or after school, as this was most convenient for the students. Interview questions followed a planned interview guide though participants were also asked a number of further probing questions to clarify points that were made or unclear. While some questions certainly presupposed students would have viewed their *Yoga 11* experience favourably, others were entirely open ended. However, all responses were related to the experienced positive features of their *Yoga 11* experience.

Sample interview questions included:

- Has the daily physical practice affected your body or health? If so, provide details.
- What other kinds of things have changed in your life because of your experience of Yoga?
- How do you think Yoga will continue to affect your health?
- Can you tell me a story about how yoga helped you when you were outside of your *Yoga 11* class?

Interviews were audio-recorded and then subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Participants were chosen through a mixed purposeful sampling strategy (Merriam, 2009; Patton, 2001). More specifically, all invited participants were former *Yoga 11* students who were less than one year removed (criterion sampling; Patton, 2001). In response to a morning video announcement at the school site, 26 former students attended an information session about the research. Twelve students returned signed consent/assent forms. From these 12 students, three female students and one male student were randomly selected (purposeful random sampling; Patton, 2001) to participate in the research interview as research participants. The 3:1 ratio for female-to-male students was purposeful in that it approximated

the higher ratio of female to male students in the course (and in the consenting students). All four participants were former *Yoga 11* students who successfully completed the course in June 2014. Cecelia, Christina, and Sally (all pseudonyms) were in grade 11 while Tommy was in grade 12.

### **Processing and Analyzing the Data**

Relevant ideas from the student responses were grouped into open codes. Merriam (2009) suggested that a recurring pattern would emerge that substantiates or enlivens the story of the research question, “How is *Yoga 11* experienced by students?” A pattern did emerge in this study. It consisted of common student experiences in *Yoga 11* that supported the related research literature, particularly with respect to the mental health benefits of yoga. The students gave concrete examples of their learning experiences and, in the process, they were able to clearly define how the yoga practice positively affected their mental health. Concomitantly, the student responses aligned with *Ashtanga* yoga philosophy, we offer.

### **Positionality of Researchers/Authors**

The three of us played different roles in this research project. The first author, Karen Berezowski, was the principal investigator. Karen has considerable experience teaching *Yoga 11*, and is recognized as one of the pioneering influences for the inclusion of yoga within Nova Scotia schools (see Figure 2). Though not a teacher at the research site during the study, Karen taught *Yoga 11* as well as other courses at the research site prior to, and subsequent to, the completion of this research. She was a graduate student at the time of the research and this study was completed as part of her Master of Education thesis. The second author, Christopher Gilham, is an expert in mental health education as well as mindfulness practices within educational and schooling contexts. As a mentor to (and now colleague of) Karen, Chris contributed to the conceptualization and writing of this paper, particularly as that conceptualization and writing relates to mindfulness. The third author, Daniel Robinson, is an expert in physical and health education curriculum, instruction, and pedagogy. He also served as Karen’s thesis supervisor. In this capacity he also played a role in establishing credibility through his involvement as a second data coder. His contributions to writing are especially related to research design and analysis.



Fig. 2: Karen teaching a *Yoga 11* class

Establishing our positionality might suggest a degree of bias. To this, we would encourage readers to consider our already established position on researcher bias (see Robinson & Berezowski, 2016). That is, “we would hope that any reader with a familiarity with qualitative research might recognize that all research is impacted, in some way, by researcher bias” (p. 9). Of course, notwithstanding this position, we also believe sharing one’s positionality and/or real or perceived biases is an essential task when disseminating research results, particularly when engaging in *qualitative* research.

### **Compliance With Ethical Standards**

This study was completed without funding. The authors have no conflicts of interests. All procedures performed in studies involving human participants were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Government of Canada’s Tri-Council Policy for the Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans. This research was approved by the Research Ethics Board of Saint Francis Xavier University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada. Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

### **Results: Students’ Experiences of the Health Benefits of *Yoga 11***

Overall, students were able to express and give examples of how yoga made them feel happier, kinder, and more self-confident. For example, Sally shared that she seemed happier when she was taking *Yoga 11*:

I think yoga made me a happier person when I was taking it, not just because I was moving my body around, but because it was a class I actually enjoyed, and just lets people take it at their own pace...and everyone was happy and enjoying their time there. (Sally, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Moreover, Tommy confidently shared how his opinions changed about yoga:

It's a stereotype, you think that's not something I can do, that's a girls' class, and you really just need to break out of your shell and give it a shot because you can't really do something unless you try. (Tommy, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Sally was also able to mindfully articulate her understanding of the importance of thinking about how her thoughts and actions can affect others:

I'm happy, not all the time, but I'm trying to stay positive and really think about others...and the way that my ways can change someone else, I never even thought about half the things that I do now, like before I took yoga. (Sally, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Yoga philosophy would explain these changes in behaviour as a return of the body to balance and ease through a mindful attention (Birch, 1995).

Given this, and upon further discussion and review of the student experiences, we agreed to create a parallel analysis of the data using the eightfold path. As previously stated, student learning outcomes regarding the origin and philosophy of *Ashtanga* yoga are a part of the *Yoga 11* curriculum. Again, *Ashtanga* yoga is described by Iyengar (2002) as an eightfold path that includes guidelines for how we treat others (*yamas*), how we treat ourselves (*niyamas*), postures (*asana*), breathwork (*pranayama*), withdrawal of the senses (*pratyahara*), concentration (*dharana*), meditation (*dhyana*), and enlightenment (*samadhi*). By interpreting the student narratives through the eightfold path, we believe we provide a deeper understanding of *Ashtanga* yoga and the benefits of *Yoga 11*. As qualitative researchers, we believe in the importance of a plurality of interpretations of data, where warranted. It is in this particular sense that researcher bias is not only revealed, but also embraced as a means of generating insight derived from a unique combination of both participant and researcher knowledge and contributions (Moules, McCaffrey, Field, & Laing, 2015, p. 124). Furthermore, as Moules et al., (2015) offer,

Articulation should not flatten something out, but infuse it with vitality, energy, image, and imagination, in such a way that the articulation itself disappears, and the topic shows itself, perhaps even allowing it to be read in a more generous way than it reads itself. (p. 131)

We offer the following parallel interpretation of the students' experiences in the spirit of providing a generous and reasonable reading of it. This further interpretation is a way of helping the topic be read as more than just the codification and thematization of data. We believe our interpretation is "well-grounded, justified, and articulated but not presented as incontrovertible" (p. 135). It is certainly not a final answer or interpretation of the students' experiences.

### ***Yamas and Niyamas***

*Yoga 11* students are introduced to the philosophical foundation of yoga, which is related to the importance of compassion and kindness to others (*yamas*) and kindness to self (*niyamas*). This study of the *yamas* and *niyamas* connects to the physical yoga practice, and one student noted how her behaviour changed in relation to herself and others:

Yoga has just helped me to be friendlier, and to, um, understand other people's perspectives.... It's really just helped me be nicer. I'm a cashier so, um, I've been more friendly to my customers and, um, yeah, and I've been trying to be friendlier to the environment. (Cecelia, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Cecelia also noted why it was important to be a compassionate human being:

It [yoga] just made you realize that, um, everybody has their own little problems and issues and to be kind to each other. (Cecelia, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Students were able to make other connections to parts of their lives that would not necessarily be observable to the teacher in the yoga class. From their stories, it appeared that these student behaviours changed because of their present-minded attention to their behaviours, and this was facilitated through the mindful curriculum they experienced in *Yoga 11*.

### **Asanas**

Christina was able to build her self-confidence through the experience of the physical postures of yoga, known as *asanas*. For youth who often struggle with issues of low self-esteem, this story of coming to know and trust her yoga practice was particularly poignant. Christina shared:

I was looking at people doing [the posture of] frog to crow, and I was like, "I don't think I'll ever be able to do that," and you know I kept thinking, "I have the focus, you know, and I know how to do it because I listened in class. I seen the teacher do it, she showed us multiple times, I seen other people doing it, I know how to do it." So I just decided to try it at home, and eventually I was actually able to do it, not hold it quite yet, but I was able to do it. That was what the best part was though. (Christina, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

All of the students noted, in some variation, that they observed focused and attentive students during the physical practice in *asana* classes. Christina explained further:

Everyone was actually trying things, even if they knew they couldn't actually do something. Everyone was willing to try and work on it until they could, and I think that's what fired everybody else up. Oh, well, they're trying, I'm going to try it too type thing. (Christina, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Christina seemed to identify the power of the peer group to modify behavior. She was able to, in her own words, identify that her classmates were focusing on improving their physical postures in yoga class.

### **Pranayama**

The *Yoga 11* students learn techniques to control the rhythm of their breath. This practice is called *pranayama* and learning to slow down the breath can bring a sense of calmness to the practitioner. Every student reported that they experienced less stress in their lives as a result of their yoga practice. It appears that the students were using *asana* and *pranayama* as effective stress coping mechanisms. Sally reported she felt "stress-free" and "I wasn't cranky." She was asked to explain what it meant if she was feeling "stressed-out," offering the following:

Um, sometimes if I'm really stressed I get a knot in my stomach but just in general I would like, shorter breath.... I'd have my mind on something else, like, it's always off going somewhere else. (Sally, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Christina shared how her focus on breathing benefited her while she was writing a final exam:

'Cause I know I did that at exams last year. I was freaking out 'cause I know that one of them I didn't study so much for.... I'm freaking out, and you know I just knew my brain started to shut down and I was just like, "I'm not going to get this done, and then I was like, alright, breath work." And I was breathing. And, you know, everything started to clear up and I was like able to pull the answers out of my brain now that I couldn't have before, because I was freaking out so bad. (Christina, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

The students were able to use their knowledge of the yoga practice in many situations and integrated this knowledge into their day-to-day functioning.

### ***Pratyahara and Dharana***

As the study of yoga philosophy progresses, the concepts become more subtle. Moving away from the observable outside body and the *asana* and *pranayama* practices, students are introduced to strategies that can activate their senses (*pratyahara*) such as sight, listening, taste, or touch. Students are asked to focus their attention on one sense, and to practise their concentration (*dharana*) while doing so. We suggest that *Yoga 11*, as a mindfulness curriculum, can be facilitated such that a student like Tommy can see himself as capable of concentration and relaxation, such that he may also positively learn from that state of directed attention:

Well, me, myself, I'm a pretty outgoing person. I'm kind of a jokester in a way, and for yoga, I was surprised I could still be my open jokester self but at the same time you really take the time to relax and focus on what you are doing. And that is something you really need to work on, especially me, because you really need to calm down and settle. And yoga, just, it comes so naturally, and like when you actually just focus on what you are doing, it's hard not to be relaxed. It's just, it does wonders really. (Tommy, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Cecelia also felt more focus as a result of her mindfulness practice:

I noticed that I was a lot more focused, um, I'm like, kind of a daydreamer so I was focusing on, like, my breath and like my next move and everything was, it just made me really focus on what I was doing in the present. (Cecelia, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

All students interviewed expressed that the yoga practice helped them to focus their attention and limit distractions. Consider Tommy's comments:

Well, you always feel great after a yoga practice. I always said like I'd be physically and mentally relaxed at home, everything is connected in a way again. (Tommy, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

From the students' stories of experiences, it appears they were using their yoga practice to mediate stressful situations.

## ***Dhyana and Samadhi***

The traditional practice of *Ashtanga* yoga was considered a lifelong practice that could eventually enable the practitioner to experience meditation (*dhyana*) and enlightenment (*samadhi*) or bliss (Birch, 1995). The introductory high school *Yoga 11* course does not expect students to achieve these yogic states of consciousness. However, the students shared stories about how they were able to experience blissful and happy moments in relation to their yoga practices:

I love nature, like just looking out the window right now and seeing all the different colours. Yoga really made me realize to just sit down, breathe, and just look, enjoy, see, instead of just sitting. I could just go sit outside and think about the million things that I'm stressing about, or I can just enjoy the moment and look at the beauty that's right in front of me. It took me a long time to realize I have to enjoy simple moments like that but yoga just opened your eyes to it. (Tommy, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Tommy was able to equate his personal happiness to his experiences in *Yoga 11*:

For you to be truly happy you need to learn to balance everything, from family, to exercise, to school. That's a hard task, and yoga really takes a big role in that. (Tommy, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

Students showed hints of deeper understanding. They were using the physical practice as a metaphor for being strong and balanced on and off the yoga mat. Christina explained, "maybe your *asanas* are modified a little bit, but you know, modifications only last so long." She came to know that her physical practice would get stronger with patience and perseverance.

When asked if she noticed a change in her understanding of yoga after completing *Yoga 11*, Christina explained in the following story how she used her experience of yoga to become more mindful of her self-confidence:

I think that it [yoga] has definitely changed my understanding on everything, on yoga... before I took yoga, I say that a lot, it's like I was the person before I started yoga and the person after I did yoga. I think that the person that I was when I took yoga, it was almost like my brain kind of opened, and my heart kind of opened into things that you know I normally wouldn't have tried before because: (a) I was either too scared, or thought I'd get made fun of. But it's like I understand everything just completely different. I'm able to do a lot more than I thought. (Christina, transcript excerpt, October 2014)

The students explained how they were able to use their yoga practice in all kinds of situations. They integrated knowledge of mindfulness practices into the day-to-day functioning of their experiences. They facilitated their own ability to self-regulate in stressful situations. These students experienced specific mental health benefits through their yoga practice.

## Conclusion and Future Considerations

The *Yoga 11* students experienced mental health benefits as a result of their mindfulness practices and learning. The student responses support the research on mindfulness in education and the mental health benefits of yoga. Additionally, and importantly, their responses reinforce the importance of their understanding of the connection between yoga as a mindfulness practice and mental health. At a time when mindfulness in education is at once popular and contested (Gunther Brown & Santorelli, 2016), this study has helped reinforce the benefits of mindfulness in education, particularly when it is taken up as curriculum. *Yoga 11* is, in and of itself, a course on mindfulness, we offer. As such, students leave the course understanding that the study and practice of mindfulness, via the curriculum of *Ashtanga* yoga, benefits their overall health, particularly their mental health. Given this, we wonder if yoga courses like *Yoga 11* could contribute as effective proactive upstream curricula as intervention possibilities for student distress, mental health problems, and illnesses. Not only does *Yoga 11* teach students stress-reduction and self-regulation practices; but the philosophy within the curriculum also offers a helpful pathway for adapting—both socially and individually—to the necessary stressors of human life. Kindness to self and others can go a long way to helping us through difficult times, we believe.

At the least, educators and educational program stakeholders could use this research to make informed decisions on how to effectively promote mental health into the school setting. This investigation shows evidence that students perceive yoga as one strategy that may improve mental health. This study has potential to encourage other researchers to inquire upon the benefits of yoga for youth. Perhaps it will be used to promote the use of yoga in schools, as it clearly explains how students are experiencing benefits from the practice. Although this study focused specifically upon the *Yoga 11* program, yoga can be easily implemented into all grade levels. A future consideration may be to develop and implement yoga curriculum that would be appropriate for younger students, as well as an advanced continuation of the *Yoga 11* high school program, possibly called *Yoga 12*. School boards may want to consider funding professional development to train more yoga teachers.

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# Supporting Students by Maintaining Professional Well-Being in High-Stress Jobs

Melanie B. Blinder, Brandis M. Ansley, Kris Varjas, Gwendolyn T. Benson, and Susan L. Ogletree

## Abstract

Student mental health, well-being, engagement, and deep learning is tied to teacher wellness. Georgia State University's Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate, and Classroom Management in partnership with The Collaboration and Resources for Encouraging and Supporting Transformations in Education project approached student health, wellness, and achievement by promoting change within teachers. Culturally specific professional development workshops were delivered to teachers, administrators, and other school staff. The workshops positively affected participants' health and well-being through activities focused on identifying the body's stress response and the development of personalized stress management plans to support healthy lifestyles.

## Supporting Students by Maintaining Professional Well-Being in High-Stress Jobs

Research consistently links desirable student outcomes (e.g., academic, social, emotional, behavioral) with their learning environments (Cohen & Geier, 2010; Greenberg, Brown, & Abenavoli, 2016). Teachers and other school personnel cultivate healthy learning environments by: a) using effective instructional methods; b) managing student behaviors using positive behavior supports; and c) building and maintaining positive relationships with students (Haynes, 2014; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Students thrive in healthy learning environments; not only do they achieve their goals academically, but they also exhibit more prosocial behaviors and less manifestations of physical and mental health problems (Cohen & Geier, 2010; Domitrovich et al., 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). The energy and emphasis given to cultivating these ideal settings is well worth the effort for the sake of supporting students. Healthy learning environments, however, must begin with those in charge of creating and maintaining them.

Educators must sustain their own physical and mental well-being in order to set that tone for their students (Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2016; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Between lesson planning, paperwork, mandated testing, stringent evaluations, and addressing a myriad of student needs, teaching is a very demanding profession that requires great physical, mental, and emotional stamina (Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2016; Brunsting, Sreckovic, & Lane, 2014; Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Greenberg et al., 2016; Pas, Bradshaw, & Hershfeldt, 2012). Educator preparation programs do not typically address how they may cope effectively with the many stressors they encounter on the job

(Emery & Vandenberg, 2010; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005). The Collaboration and Resources for Encouraging and Supporting Transformations in Education (CREST-Ed; <http://crest.education.gsu.edu/>) initiative at Georgia State University (GSU) recognized the need for stress management and effective coping skills in school personnel. As part of this U.S. DOE funded grant, the GSU Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate, and Classroom Management (The Center; <http://schoolsafety.education.gsu.edu/>) was contracted to address the professional development (PD) needs of teachers, administrators, and other school staff in schools.

## **The Partnership**

The CREST-Ed Grant was developed to meet the challenges of preparing and retaining teachers for the specific demands of teaching critical subjects in high-needs schools in urban and rural localities. The CREST-Ed Grant was awarded to the GSU's College of Education & Human Development by the U.S. Department of Education in the fall of 2014. GSU was one of 24 institutions nationwide to be awarded this competitive teacher quality partnership grant. Through CREST-Ed's focus on teacher preparation and retention, an emphasis was made to engage existing teachers, pre-service teachers, and other school professionals in collaborative professional development (PD) opportunities. These PDs are tailored to the specific needs of the partnering schools as articulated by the school leaders and community stakeholders involved.

The Center was originally included in the grant to facilitate PDs for CREST-Ed to meet the Grant's goal of teacher preparation and retention, specifically in the areas of bullying prevention and intervention. The team originally comprised the Center's director, who is also a professor in the Counseling and Psychological Services department at GSU, and a graduate student pursuing a Specialist in Education (EdS) in School Psychology. The graduate student had been a teacher for 10 years before returning to graduate school. She was hired not only for her experience developing interactive and engaging presentations, but also because her teaching experiences gave her insight into the needs of school personnel.

Upon its initial work with CREST-Ed, The Center staff became aware of the need for mental health and wellness support for teachers in CREST-Ed partnered schools. In an early meeting of district coordinators, service providers, and university faculty associated with CREST-Ed, it was shared that 10 out of 11 participating schools expressed needs for stress management and wellness workshops for their staff. As the CREST-Ed schools and students are recognized as high needs, personnel working in the building sites are considered to be at a higher risk of burnout, and therefore, health problems, poor job performance, and attrition (Boyd et al., 2011; Torres, 2016). To meet these needs, the director of The Center hired a doctoral student in special education with past experience in clinical psychology and delivering stress management workshops. As part of The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Program and doctoral level training grant entitled Project LEADERS (Leaders in Exceptionalities Alternative and Delinquency-related Environments through Research and Scholarship) at GSU, this advanced doctoral student had conducted research related to best practices regarding interventions that were effective with youth thought to be at-risk of school failure in alternative education settings.

Her research focus addressed such interventions by addressing the mental health and wellness needs of teachers and other school personnel and had resulted in the opportunity to publish a research-to-practice article (Ansley et al., 2016) and participate in a podcast about her published work (<http://www.pubs.cec.sped.org/podcast-optimizing-special-educator-wellness-and-job-performance-through-stress-management/>). This advanced doctoral student's experience was made further relevant by her eight years of teaching experience in high-need schools. With the addition of the third team member, The Center's CREST-Ed team began developing and providing PDs for partnered schools to include her areas of expertise.

### **Professional Development for School Personnel Wellness and Stress Management**

The Center's CREST-Ed team was able to collaborate with participating schools and delivered PDs focused on teacher wellness, self-care, and stress management strategies. The Center's team approached the task of working with schools from a culturally specific, needs-based design. These partnerships were founded in reciprocal phases of needs-based inquiry and hosting school feedback. These efforts helped to establish relationships between the professional development facilitators and the hosting school's stakeholders to ensure meaningful experiences for all participants. In a distinctive approach to creating professional development seminars and workshops, The Center's CREST-Ed team did not deliver pre-made and formerly developed presentations to hosting schools. Rather, school, culture, and context-specific presentations were developed for the particular needs of the school personnel who were receiving the training. The presentations were guided by input from school administrators and other staff members in an iterative process with respect to the valuable information the school personnel had to share with the professional development facilitators to address local and contextual issues (Nastasi, Varjas, Bernstein, & Jayasena, 2000; Nastasi, Moore, & Varjas, 2004). Although varied in the makeup of their staff, the age of students taught (elementary and secondary), and the unique challenges for their community, school stakeholders continually shared the same needs for their staff: help with self-care and stress management. These schools asked the facilitators from The Center to develop presentations to deliver information about personal wellness, de-escalation, and stress management techniques and strategies for teachers as well as students.

### **Culturally Relevant Practices**

The Center's CREST-Ed team took a culturally specific approach to the partnerships in order to make the work The Center engaged in with the teachers at the participating schools relevant. Similar to the phases of Participatory Culture-Specific Consultation (PCSC; Nastasi et al., 2000), The Center's team has approached its partnership with CREST-Ed schools with a systematic method to developing and delivering professional developments. PCSC is a "nonlinear and recursive process" (Nastasi et al., 2000 p. 404) where facilitators and stakeholders are engaged in active discussion and reflection throughout the consultation process. As such, the team has met with stakeholders at each school prior to every PD delivered to ensure that the specific needs of that community were met by the team.

As with PCSC, the initial phases of partnerships began with learning the culture of the participating schools and forming partnerships. Unlike many PDs brought to schools from outside contributors, there have been no canned programs or presentations delivered to schools or other audiences by The Center's CREST-Ed team. Work in the schools is an ever-changing and evolving partnership between The Center and the identified schools. The work done by The Center's team is consistent with multi-tiered systems of support where focus has been placed on universal supports for the teachers and staff members at the schools, as well as to more specific groups of school professionals who have been identified as needing more focused intervention and support from The Center's staff. Furthermore, the stress management and wellness presentations that have been delivered to the schools are not developed for a particular academic content area. The information is presented in ways which are applicable to teachers regardless of subject area taught, or age of students in the classroom, and has been delivered to teachers at all levels of education: elementary, middle, and high school staff, as well as to pre-service teachers in both undergraduate and graduate programs. When given the opportunity to present information in novel contexts, such as through webinars, The Center staff further adjusts their content delivery and the resources provided.

### **PD Materials and Activities**

To date, the Center's CREST-Ed team has delivered stress-management focused PDs to over 400 school professionals. The Center's team has created a Three-Tiered Model for Educator Stress Management (see Appendix A) based on research (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2016) that links self-care to optimal wellness and job performance, which ultimately affects their job satisfaction, school climate, and student outcomes. At the foundation of stress-management is self-care. Self-care behaviors promote wellness as well as the ability to perform on the job and build positive relationships with others. These positive relationships are not only requisite to effective instruction and behavior management, but personal connections also make a difference during tense moments that require de-escalation. Thus, the core focus of The Center's presentations are often on self-care and tied to the learning environment with the idea that the educator's wellness must come first.

Workshops were most often structured by a Self-Directed Stress Management Plan (SSMP; see Appendix B). The original version of the SSMP (Ansley et al., 2016) was developed for special educators to illustrate how personalized stress management plans can be written and implemented in a similar way to that of students' Individual Education Plans (IEPs), a process with which they are familiar. It was intended to guide educators while allowing flexibility to include preferred coping strategies. The original SSMP accompanied an article that described evidence-based strategies that reduce stress-related symptoms (Ansley et al., 2016). Since then, the SSMP was modified (SSMP 2.0) to meet the contextual need of a Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) PD webinar (<http://www.pubs.cec.sped.org/web1701a/>). This version was designed to facilitate participants' engagement in a guided and scaffolded interaction with the resource. The SSMP 2.0 also included components specific to the school day (workplace relationships, communications, and de-escalation), whereas the original SSMP mostly focused on self-care outside the job, under the premise that better coping skills would also improve the

quality of their work experiences. While self-care remains the core of the PDs, the team from The Center also sought to demonstrate how effective self-care and coping also applied directly to the school setting. The most recent version, the SSMP 3.0, was developed to help engage workshop attendees in their own individualized stress management plan. It more closely resembles the SSMP 2.0, with additional examples of positive work-related communications listed in the guide.

Facilitators began workshops, not only with an explanation of their professional backgrounds, to build credibility with attendees, but they also made themselves vulnerable by disclosing their own experiences with educator stress. By doing so, The Center's team encouraged the audience to explore their own experiences and motivations to manage their own stress. From there, the workshops moved into the identification and recognition of stress, the natural physiological and psychological reactions to stress, and science-backed ways to go about managing stress. Presenters have utilized multiple modalities to deliver content. Facilitators have used interactive technology, such as Padlet ([www.padlet.com](http://www.padlet.com)), to engage participants in meaningful discussion, small groups and corporative learning groups which utilize strategies such as jigsaw learning, didactic instruction, experiential learning through discussions of vignettes describing examples of teachers experiencing burnout, and many opportunities for reflective practices.

### **Participant Feedback and the Iterative Process**

The effectiveness of the PDs ultimately is determined by the attendees. No matter how well organized or scientifically based, the content must have meaning and be useful to participants if it is going to be effective. The Center's team used a combination of verbal feedback and surveys from CREST-Ed leaders, school administrators, and attendees to help refine workshops. This is much of why each version of the SSMP has become more specific as subsequent PDs have been delivered to new audiences. While the original version emphasized a variety of stress management strategies, the latest SSMP has focused on ways to apply mindfulness to one's personal life as well as his or her learning environment. Mindfulness-based interventions have the most empirical research support among school-based stress-reduction studies (Ansley, Houchins, & Varjas, 2017; Greenberg et al., 2016). In addition, mindfulness requires less time commitment and financial investment in comparison to other stress-reduction methods. This was of paramount importance, as many educators constantly reported a lack of time and monetary resources for self-care as barriers to their engagement in these practices. The increased focus on mindfulness in the later versions of the SSMP helped address such obstacles.

### **Successes and Otherwise**

The Center's team has received positive feedback regarding attendees' interest in their own self-care. After most workshops, the facilitators have been contacted by participants with requests for resources. In some cases, school administrators have requested additional sessions from The Center. For one school in particular, the Center has made multiple appearances and delivered presentations specific to building positive relationships, classroom management, de-escalation training, and creating safe spaces.

The team's efforts have certainly been met with challenges as well. There were instances when the facilitators were asked to present to teachers who were unaware that they would be missing their planning period; a rather stressful way to start a mindfulness and stress management workshop. At other times, the facilitators presented to a faculty of 40-plus participants where the air-conditioning stopped running minutes into the presentation. A crowded room with no air-conditioning in Georgia in the month of May could be compared to a slow cooker, the temperature creating a system of pressure which gradually *cooks* the inhabitants. Additionally, the demeanor of some of the participants who were required to attend (e.g., faculty meeting, workshops during planning periods) was often different from presentations where they chose to attend (e.g., conference workshops, concurrent session options). Some participants who were required to attend openly expressed their disdain with having to be there. The facilitators generally respond with compassion (e.g., "I know you're all super busy, and we appreciate that you're here," "We can remember frustrations of losing some of our planning time." "There's no tired like teacher tired."). The best-case scenario was when those most reluctant actually turned out to be the most active participants. Facilitators were able to engage participants by giving them real-world examples of mindful practice in schools where students are similar to their own, being open with their own experiences of mindful practices and mismanaged stress, and by being empathetic to the teachers' concerns. In an I-wouldn't-have-believed-it-if-I-hadn't-seen-it-for-myself-moment, participants attending a professional development on finishing the school year strong and preparing students for stress related to upcoming high-stakes testing, teachers were visibly shocked and impressed when they viewed a video of students practicing mindful meditations in the classroom as a regular part of the school day and even more so as a redirection strategy for students who had participated in a physical altercation with one another. Other times, forced participants have been off-task and engaged in other activities (e.g., on their personal computers or other electronic devices). While the workshops involved frequent interaction, facilitators respected each attendee's choice to determine their level of participation. Based on observation, mandatory attendees appeared more enthusiastic about the PDs when they were given advance notice and expected the workshops. The most resistance, as indicated by nonverbal gestures or disengagement, appeared most often when attendees were not made aware of the PDs and instructed without notice to drop what they were doing and report to the workshop.

## **Future Directions**

The Center for Research on School Safety, School Climate, and Classroom Management continues its work in supporting teacher health and wellness and affecting student achievement by developing and delivering lectures, seminars, trainings, and webinars on the subject of teacher health and wellness. Student engagement and deep learning cannot happen in an educational system that does not take care of its educators. Teacher well-being is a crucial piece to the puzzle which is student achievement. By engaging in activities which help teachers learn how to recognize and manage their stress, they are better able to manage and serve their students.

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## Appendix A

### The Center's Three-Tiered Model for Educator Stress Management



## Appendix B

### Guide to Self-Directed Stress Management Plan 3.0

1. Why manage YOUR stress? How can you benefit from effective coping skills?

2. Identify your signs of burnout and risk for stress-related symptoms. What happens with you, physically and/or mentally, when your stress levels have reached a critical point?

- |  |   |  |
|--|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> high blood pressure   | <input type="checkbox"/> increased heart rate | <input type="checkbox"/> chronic aches and pains           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> indigestion/heartburn | <input type="checkbox"/> problems sleeping    | <input type="checkbox"/> irritability/sadness/mood changes |
| <input type="checkbox"/> relationship problems | <input type="checkbox"/> increased fear/worry | <input type="checkbox"/> lack of patience/tolerance        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> dread/pessimism       | <input type="checkbox"/> lack of mental focus | <input type="checkbox"/> tense/feel you cannot relax       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> weight gain or loss   | <input type="checkbox"/> upset stomach        | <input type="checkbox"/> more simple errors than usual     |

3. Basic self-care

3a. Nutrition. List one target behavior that will improve your nutrition as it pertains to your quality of life. What will you change? How? When?

*(e.g., I will consume 64 ounces, or four small bottles, of water each day. I will have my first sip of water before I get started with my day.)*

3b. Exercise or Movement. List one target behavior that will keep you physically fit or at least get you started.

*(e.g., I will park from the furthest space out. When I have no more than two floors up or down to go, I will take stairs, not elevator.)*

3c. Other basic self-care. List one additional target behavior that will improve your quality of life. This may be related to your sleep, social, or other basic wellness-related habits.

*(e.g., On school/work nights, I will stop all activities and begin a wind-down routine at 10 pm.)*



4c. Other mindspace “consumables.” Consider what you will consume with your mindspace, for your own well-being.

<p style="text-align: center;">LESS</p> <p>(e.g., news, nerve “rattling” documentaries, fear-mongering, gossip, drama-filled relationships, tending to every notification on my phone)</p>	<p style="text-align: center;">MORE</p> <p>(e.g., inspirational/spiritual podcasts, supportive connections with others [humans and animals], soothing music, nature, coloring, arts/crafts, cooking, gardening)</p>

5. Interpersonal Relationships at Work

Tips for promoting positive workplace relationships

<p>Students</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Balance corrections with compliments. Begin with positive feedback.</li> <li>• Use specific praise with every student.</li> <li>• Use reinforcements to promote desired behaviors, rather than relying on punitive methods for unwanted behaviors.</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>_____</li> </ul>
<p>Parents</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Always begin a phone call, email, or meeting with positive feedback.</li> <li>• For teachers: Contact parents at the beginning of the year, just to say you look forward to working with their child.</li> <li>• _____</li> <li>_____</li> </ul>



# Evaluation of an Educator-Delivered School-Based Stress Management Program for Adolescents

Dana Carsley, Jessica Mettler, Amy J. Shapiro, Devin J. Mills, Elana L. Bloom, and Nancy L. Heath

## Abstract

This study sought to determine if educators could deliver StressOFF Strategies (SOS), a brief classroom-based stress management program (Shapiro & Heath, 2013) to students and to evaluate educators' perspectives on SOS delivery. Seventeen educators participated in a two-day training and delivered the program to 555 adolescents (51.4% female;  $M_{age} = 14.45$  years,  $SD = 0.74$ ). Student evaluations revealed equivalent student satisfaction with educator and SOS team delivery on students' program rating; furthermore, 100% of educators strongly agreed (38.5%) or agreed (61.5%) that SOS was relevant, met their expectations, and was feasible within their school. Implications for schools and educators will be discussed.

## Evaluation of an Educator-Delivered School-Based Stress Management Program for Adolescents

Adolescents are reporting high levels of stress (APA, 2014). Stress occurs when individuals can no longer cope with the demands of their environment and they perceive the environment as a threat to their well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). High school is considered to be a critical period of academic and societal stress for adolescents as they begin to make their own decisions about their future, and experience various physical, psychological, and social changes (de Anda et al., 2000; Foret et al., 2012; Hankin, Mermelstein, & Roesch, 2007). Research has demonstrated that the experience of stress in adolescents is often associated with negative outcomes (Byrne, Davenport, & Mazanov, 2007; Kraag, Zeegers, Kok, Hosman, & Abu-Saad, 2006; Rudolph & Hammen, 1999), such as depression (Compas, Orosan, & Grant, 1993; Galaif, Sussman, Chou, & Wills, 2003), anxiety (Byrne et al., 2007; Rudolph, 2002), suicidal ideation (Diaz, Symnatov, & Rickert, 2002), as well as poor academic performance (Frydenberg et al., 2004; Kaplan, Liu, & Kaplan, 2005). Given the psychological and physical implications of stress (Frydenberg et al., 2004; Hankin et al., 2007), it is essential for adolescents to receive accessible and effective stress management knowledge and strategies in order to help them cope.

When individuals perceive that the demands of the situation are greater than their ability to cope, they can experience cognitive, behavioural, and/or emotional symptoms of stress (Washington, 2009). Stress has been shown to be particularly prevalent during the high school years as students create and interact with their social environments, form their personal identities, and go through physical and psychological changes (Foret et al., 2012; Hankin et al., 2007). Furthermore, high school represents a period in which

adolescents also report experiencing specific in-school stressors related to academics such as the concern over grades, and present and future performance (de Anda et al., 2000). In a recent report by the American Psychological Association (2014), "Stress in America: Are Teens Adopting Adults' Stress Habits?" over 1000 adolescents participated in an online survey in which they were asked about their attitudes and perceptions of stress and stress management. According to the survey, 83% of adolescents reported school as the most common stressor; one which can negatively affect grades, time management, and personal relationships (APA, 2014). Adolescents have also indicated that they experience stress about the future (APA, 2014; de Anda et al., 2000). Although adolescents are reporting high school-related stress, the majority revealed they did not know how to manage their stress; in fact, they were reportedly unaware if they were adequately managing their stress and did not make enough time for stress management. In addition, results from the survey showed that adolescents experienced difficulties finding examples of healthy coping and stress management (APA, 2014).

According to Foret and colleagues (2012), there is a need for interventions that focus on stress management and stress reduction for adolescents. Stress management training can support adolescents in building resilience by limiting worries and perceived stress, enhancing self-esteem, and encouraging healthy coping (Foret et al., 2012). Furthermore, research has indicated that adolescents' ability to manage and cope with stress can positively affect their current and future psychological well-being (Compas et al., 1993; Compas, Connor-Smith, Saltzman, Thomsen, & Wadsworth, 2001).

The school has been suggested as an important setting to build resilience in youth and limit the negative long-term psychological effects and consequences associated with stress (Frydenberg et al., 2004). Schools allow access to a large number of individuals and have been shown to reduce the stigma often associated with stress as students are not singled out (Fridrici & Lohaus, 2009; Shochet et al., 2001). Additionally, due to the fact that the majority of students can be reached in this setting, participation and retention rates are not a concern (Fridrici & Lohaus, 2009; Huberty, 2012; Shochet et al., 2001), and expenses, and organizational and transportation needs are minimized (Frydenberg et al., 2004; Lock & Barrett, 2003). Given that adolescents frequently report school-related stressors (APA, 2014; de Anda et al., 2000), it would be important to address stress in youth and implement stress management programs directly in the classroom setting, as opposed to students being pulled out or seeking limited community resources.

Although many school-based stress management programs exist for children and adolescents (e.g., Bothe, Grignon, & Olness, 2014; Bunn, Bifulco, Lorenc, & Robinson, 2007; Garcia, Kemmick Pintor, & Lindgren, 2010; Gelkopf & Berger, 2009; Hampel, Meier, & Kummel, 2008; Kraag, Van Breukelen, Kok, & Hosman, 2009; Szabo & Marian, 2012), schools often find these programs lengthy, time-consuming, or difficult to implement (Fridrici & Lohaus, 2009). For instance, in a meta-analysis of school-based stress management programs implemented between 1976 and 2003, Kraag and colleagues (2006) tentatively concluded that primary prevention school-based stress management training programs that focus on promoting mental health were most effective. However, when examining these programs more closely, the sessions for each program were often implemented multiple times per week, and the majority of the programs required outside personnel (e.g., mental health professional, graduate student,

undergraduate student, experimenter) to deliver or assist in delivering the program with the classroom teacher. Although these programs appeared to be effective, schools often reject programs that are difficult to integrate within their schools, such as programs that are time-consuming and require additional outside personnel to deliver the programs (Fridrici & Lohaus, 2009).

A solution for decreasing the demands on schools while increasing limited resources would be to have educators deliver the stress management programs in their classrooms. According to Frydenberg and colleagues (2004), school-based programs are successful when the teacher is actively involved in the delivery of the program. In their study, "The Best of Coping: Developing Coping Skills Program" (Frydenberg & Brandon, 2002) was delivered four separate times in two school settings, which comprise four studies. In Study 1, a psychologist or counsellor delivered the program to 83 adolescents (53% female), and in Study 2, the first and third author delivered the program to 113 adolescents (49.5% female; Frydenberg et al., 2004). In Study 3, there were 88 adolescents (44% female); 43 students received the program delivered by a team that consisted of a teacher and psychologist, and 45 students served as the control group. Similarly, in Study 4, a teacher and psychologist team delivered the program to 235 adolescents (45% female); 179 students received the intervention and 56 students were the control group. In Study 4, the teachers received a condensed version of the training to deliver this program compared to a more complete and thorough training that the teachers in Study 3 received. The program included an examination of coping strategies, problem solving, communication, decision-making, goal setting, and time management. Overall, the four studies demonstrated modest support for the enhancement of stress coping skills; however, the program was shown to be most effective in Study 3, when it was delivered collaboratively by the psychologist and classroom teachers that were more thoroughly trained in program delivery compared with the limited training teachers in Study 4 received. Although mental health prevention in the school is typically assumed to be the role of the school psychologist, results revealed that when teachers are involved in the training and delivery of the program, the program could be even more beneficial (Frydenberg et al., 2004).

In a more recent study involving educators as deliverers, Hampel and colleagues (2008) examined the effectiveness of Anti-Stress-Training (AST), a school-based universal stress management prevention program for adolescents. In this study, 17 teachers were coached on how to deliver the AST program to 320 students (50% female) during class; 138 adolescents received the AST program, and 182 adolescents served as no-treatment controls. Teachers were trained by doctoral students and received information on stress, relaxation exercises, experiential education, an information booklet, and techniques for integrating stress management within the curriculum. Following the delivery of the six-week AST program, teachers were asked to assess the training they experienced. The majority of teachers indicated that students' self-efficacy was enhanced, and 57% of teachers reported that the training was useful. In addition to the teacher reports, students rated the training as highly acceptable. This study demonstrates how a universal stress management program could be beneficial for students when delivered by a classroom educator. Nevertheless, the time required to implement a six-week program is a challenge for many schools. Given the emphasis on academic performance in schools, one of the concerns school staff have when implementing new programs is the loss of time that is typically devoted to curriculum (Fridrici & Lohaus, 2009).

Researchers have also investigated whether students prefer an educator-delivered school-based program that took place after school hours. Garcia and colleagues (2010) assessed the feasibility and acceptability of a 14-week school-based coping intervention, "Project Wings," for Latina adolescents that consisted of two interventions; the first intervention included 10 participants and took place during school hours, and the second intervention included 11 participants and occurred after school. This school-based coping program was co-led by an experienced facilitator and a school staff member and consisted of weekly meetings that included sharing circles, relaxation exercises, and skill building. Feedback from the students indicated overall acceptability and program satisfaction, and the authors noted that having a school-based facilitator ensured consistency and increased connectedness with the students. Although the students reported mixed results regarding their preference for the scheduling of the program (after school vs. during school hours), similar to the abovementioned stress management programs, this program was lengthy and required consistent support from outside personnel.

To address the limitations of the stress management programs reviewed earlier, StressOFF Strategies (SOS; Shapiro & Heath, 2013) was created as a brief, universal *single-session* school-based stress management program for adolescents. SOS is a 45-minute stress management program that focuses on effective coping strategies to help adolescents manage their stress. The program consists of four key components: (a) Psychoeducation, (b) Decreasing stigma around experienced stress and associated mental health problems, (c) Teaching and practicing coping skills, and (d) Follow-up reinforcement of skills. In order to evaluate the preliminary feasibility and social acceptability of this program, trained SOS team members delivered SOS to over 565 adolescents (57% female), and demonstrated positive post-program results (Shapiro, Heath, & Carsley, 2015). SOS was found to be teen-friendly, highly engaging, and adolescents reported that they were willing to use the learned strategies in the future. Specifically, following the single-session program, 88.7% of students rated SOS as good to excellent, and 86.5% of students indicated that they learned a medium amount to a lot overall (Shapiro et al., 2015). Furthermore, 80.5% to 84.1% of participants indicated that they understood the strategies taught quite well to very well, and 71.0% to 82.5% were willing to use these strategies in the future. Findings from this program have been published in academic journals and presented at academic conferences (Shapiro & Heath, 2013; Shapiro & Heath, 2014; Shapiro et al., 2015; Shapiro, Mettler, Carsley, Hu, & Heath, 2014; Shapiro, Hu, Joly, Emery, & Heath, 2013).

Consistent with the research reviewed above, results from the SOS program demonstrate that adolescents need and are willing to participate in stress management training. Research has shown that stress management programs are particularly effective when classroom educators have integral roles in the delivery of the program (e.g., Frydenberg et al., 2004; Hampel et al., 2008); however, existing educator-delivered stress management programs for adolescents often require multiple sessions over longer periods of time. Although SOS demonstrated positive post-program results when delivered by trained SOS team members, outside delivery of stress management programs and the increasing demands on school mental health resources are not always feasible with limited school budgets and time constraints (Evans & Weist, 2004). In order to address these challenges, it would be beneficial for a universal, brief single-session

school-based stress management program in schools that is both cost-effective and sustainable over time to be exclusively delivered by existing school personnel.

The present study sought to determine if educators (classroom teachers and technicians) could deliver SOS to their students and to determine educators' perspectives on SOS delivery. Specific objectives were to 1) assess the feasibility and social acceptability of SOS when delivered by educators through students' post-program reports of learning, program satisfaction, understanding of and willingness to use the stress management strategies taught, 2) compare student evaluations of educator versus SOS team program delivery and 3) assess educators' overall program satisfaction, knowledge of material, and perspectives on the program's feasibility.

## Method

### Summary of Program

StressOFF Strategies is a brief, universal, single-session school-based stress management program for adolescents consisting of four key components: (a) Psychoeducation, (b) Decreasing stigma, (c) Coping skills, and (d) Follow-up. In the psychoeducation component of the program, students are taught about stress and its psychological, physical, and behavioural characteristics. In order to decrease stigma, students are informed on the universality of stress through video clips and a "Celebrity Stress Trivia" game. The coping skills that students are taught include a combination of cognitive behavioural techniques (e.g., cognitive restructuring, progressive muscle relaxation) and mindfulness-based techniques (e.g., present-moment awareness and acceptance) that have been found to be effective for stress management. Finally, students are provided with a pamphlet and resources for follow-up and reinforcement of skills.

### Participants

The sample of educators consisted of 14 teachers and technicians (78.57% female) from nine high schools in Montreal, Quebec, Canada, representing low to high socioeconomic status. Although 17 educators were trained to deliver the SOS program, three educators were unable to deliver the program due to classroom scheduling issues. Over a period of two months, the remaining 14 educators delivered the program in their classrooms or in an assembly setting to a total of 631 students. Of these participants, 76 students were excluded from analyses for two reasons. First, due to scheduling, some of the sessions had specific time constraints; as such, a number of students did not have enough time to complete the post-program measure, and were excluded from the final analyses. Second, the majority of the students excluded represented an unusual population that the program was not designed for; specifically, these students were from an alternative school, had moderate to severe emotional and behavior disabilities, and many demonstrated severe learning disabilities. Although the educator attempted to deliver SOS to this group of students, it was discovered early on that the material designed

for this program was the wrong level for these students. As a result, the final sample comprised a total of 555 students (51.4% female;  $M_{age} = 14.45$ ,  $SD = 0.74$ ).

## Measures

**Student evaluations.** After participating in the SOS program, students were asked to evaluate their educator's delivery of the program. Using four-point Likert-type scales, students rated how much they felt they had learned on a scale ranging from *nothing* (0) to *a lot* (3); the complexity of the program on a scale from *not sure* (0) to *too complicated* (3); and the overall program on a scale from *poor* (1) to *excellent* (4). The students were also asked to evaluate their understanding of the strategies taught in the program (thought challenge, muscle relaxation, self-observer, and support and better choices) using a four-point Likert scale ranging from *not very well* (1) to *understand very well* (3), with an option for *already knew* (4). Finally, they were asked to rate their willingness to use these strategies in the future on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *never: I don't need to use stress management* (0) to *always* (4).

**Educator evaluations.** The educators were asked to evaluate their experience with SOS by rating a number of items on a five-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree or always* (1) to *strongly disagree or never* (5). This questionnaire consisted of 17 items assessing their satisfaction with SOS (e.g., "I found the program to be beneficial"), their knowledge of the material provided (e.g., "I now know how to deliver the StressOFF program"), and their perspectives on the program feasibility (e.g., "I found the StressOFF program to be feasible in my school").

## Procedure

Following university ethics and school board approval, the educators were trained to deliver the SOS program during a two-day workshop offered by the SOS team. During this training session, the educators were first shown a live presentation of the SOS program by a trained research assistant. The educators then received a manual with a detailed script of the program to guide their delivery of the SOS program to their students and the primary researcher provided an in-depth explanation of the four strategies in the program. At the end of the first day of the workshop, the educators were asked to practice the presentation at home. The second day of the workshop consisted of a group presentation, in which the educators took turns practicing and presenting either on their own or in pairs, and received feedback from the primary researcher.

Over the following eight weeks, the educators distributed consent forms to students in their schools, so that the students could participate in the evaluation of the educators' presentation of SOS. Following consent form returns, the educators scheduled times in which they would deliver SOS to their students. For each presentation, trained research assistants went to the school to deliver assent forms and questionnaires for the students to fill out before and after the presentation.

Two months following the initial two-day workshop, a half-day follow-up session was conducted in which the educators received feedback on their program delivery and had the opportunity to evaluate their experience with SOS training and delivery.

## Results

When examining normality for each item within the student evaluations of the educators and of the SOS team members, no departure from normality was found. Furthermore, no outliers were identified in the data. However, students who had skipped more than two items on the student evaluations, as well as those who had not indicated a gender, were excluded from analyses.

### **Feasibility and Social Acceptability of a Stress Management Program Delivered by Educators**

In the post-program reports, students were asked to rate the amount of information they learned about stress management and their overall program satisfaction. Following the program, 80% of students indicated that they learned a medium amount to a lot ( $M = 2.00$ ,  $SD = 0.70$ ) on a four-point scale from *nothing* (0) to *a lot* (3). In terms of program satisfaction, the majority of students (83.2%) rated the program as good to excellent ( $M = 3.05$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) on a four-point scale from *poor* (1) to *excellent* (4).

Students were also asked to rate their understanding of the stress management strategies taught and willingness to use these strategies in the future. Overall, the majority of students reported high understanding of and willingness to use all four of the stress management strategies taught (see Figures 1 and 2).

### **Comparison of Educators vs. SOS Team Delivery of a Stress Management Program**

In order to compare student ratings of educator versus SOS team program delivery, a 2 X 2 ANOVA was conducted for each item on the questionnaire. With a total of 10 ANOVAs, the alpha was modified to .005 using the Bonferroni method. As displayed in Table 1, student evaluations of the educators' program delivery were similar for both groups of presenters (educators and SOS team members). Although there was a significant difference on the amount students reported to have learned ( $F(1, 1113) = 9.629$ ,  $p = .002$ ;  $\eta = .009$ ) and their reports of program satisfaction ( $F(1, 1062) = 8.323$ ,  $p = .004$ ;  $\eta = .008$ ) with SOS team program delivery being rated as slightly higher, these differences were marginal. No significant differences in male and female student evaluations for the educators compared to the SOS team members were found.

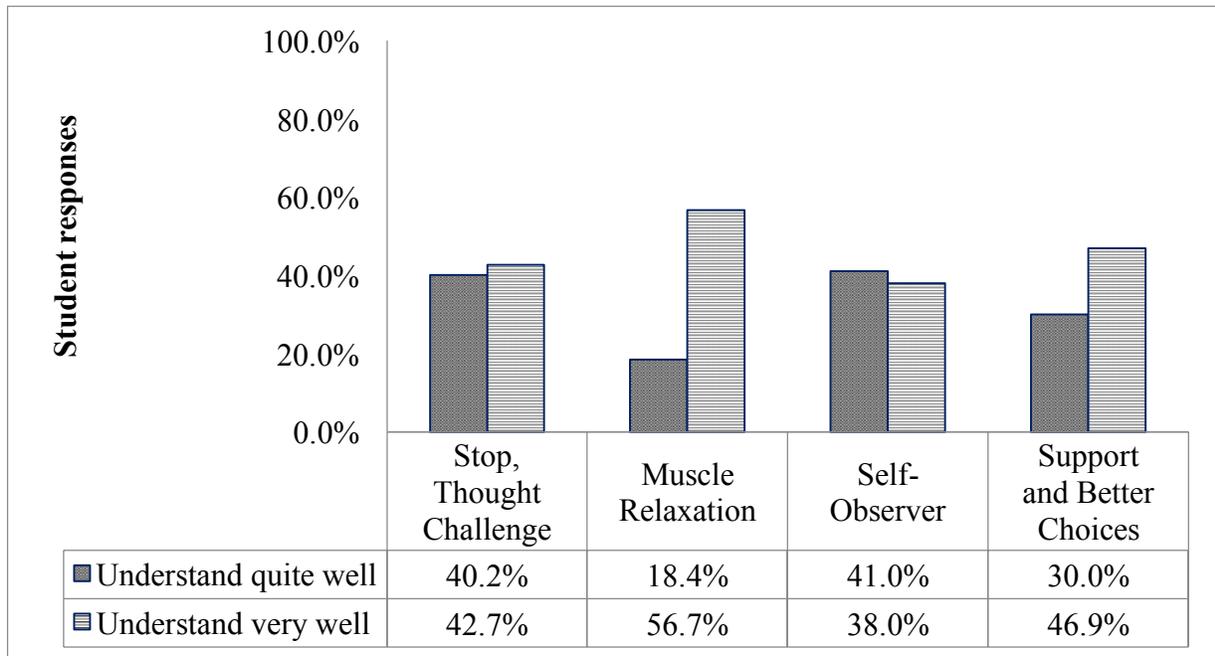


Fig. 1. Students' understanding of stress management strategies taught: Percentage of students indicating that they understood *quite well* and *very well* the four strategies presented in StressOFF Strategies.

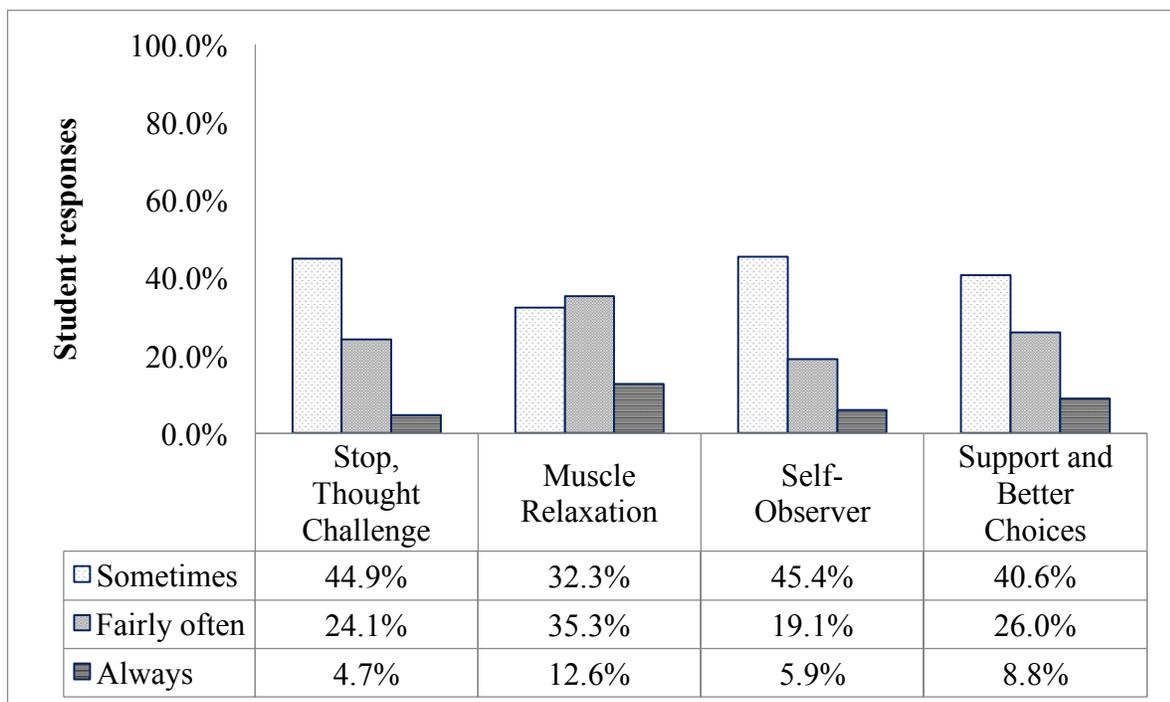


Fig 2. Students' willingness to use the stress management strategies taught: Percentage of students indicating that they were *sometimes*, *fairly often*, and *always* willing to use the four strategies presented in StressOFF Strategies in order to deal with future stress.

**Table 1**

Student evaluations of StressOFF Strategies when the program was delivered by educators and the SOS team, and comparison of delivery between the two groups.

	<i>Students from educator delivery</i>		<i>Students from SOS team delivery</i>		<i>Group Differences</i>			
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>F</i>	$\eta^2$	<i>p</i>
Amount students learned about stress management after workshop <sup>1</sup>	2.01	0.7	2.14	0.661	1	9.629	.009	.002*
Program satisfaction <sup>2</sup>	3.04	0.684	3.16	0.649	1	8.323	.008	.004*
Understanding of stress management strategies <sup>3</sup>								
<i>Thought challenge</i>	2.51	0.769	2.53	0.754	1	0.093	.000	.760
<i>Muscle relaxation</i>	2.92	0.758	2.88	0.662	1	1.144	.001	.285
<i>Self-observer</i>	2.42	0.815	2.88	0.662	1	0.096	.000	.756
<i>Support and better choices</i>	2.69	0.822	2.44	0.766	1	0.213	.000	.644
Willingness to use stress management strategies <sup>4</sup>								
<i>Thought challenge</i>	1.98	0.987	1.93	0.943	1	1.370	.001	.242
<i>Muscle relaxation</i>	2.32	1.096	2.38	1.037	1	.196	.000	.658
<i>Self-observer</i>	1.91	1.0146	1.97	0.974	1	.326	.000	.568
<i>Support and better choices</i>	2.09	1.075	2.18	1.028	1	.713	.001	.399

\* Significant at the modified alpha level ( $p < .005$ )

<sup>1</sup> Likert-type four-point scale (0 = Nothing at all; 1 = Small amount; 2 = Medium amount; 3 = A lot)

<sup>2</sup> Likert-type four-point scale (1 = Poor; 2 = Satisfactory; 3 = Good; 4 = Excellent)

<sup>3</sup> Likert-type four-point scale (1 = Not very well; 2 = Understand quite well; 3 = Understand very well; 3 = Already knew)

<sup>4</sup> Likert-type five-point scale (0 = Never – don't need to use stress management; 1 = Never – don't like this technique; 2 = Sometimes; 4 = Always)

## Educator Perspectives on Delivering a Stress Management Program

**Program satisfaction.** When asked how satisfied they were with SOS, 100% of educators strongly agreed (38.5%) or agreed (61.5%) that SOS was relevant and met their expectations and 100% of educators strongly agreed (46.2%) or agreed (53.8%) that SOS was beneficial. Similarly, 100% of educators strongly agreed (61.6%) or agreed (38.5%) that SOS was a valuable professional/personal development experience, and 100% of educators strongly agreed (53.8%) or agreed (46.2%) that they would recommend SOS to other colleagues.

**Knowledge of material.** In addition to overall program satisfaction, educators were also asked to rate their knowledge of SOS material. Results revealed that 92.3% of educators strongly agreed (38.5%) or agreed (53.8%) that they now know how to deliver SOS and are comfortable with delivering the introduction section of the program. Furthermore, 100% of educators strongly agreed (30.8%) or agreed (69.2%) that they are comfortable with delivering the psychoeducation section of the program, and 92.3% of educators strongly agreed (30.8%) or agreed (61.5%) that they are comfortable with delivering the strategies in the program. Overall, 92.3% strongly agreed (30.8%) or agreed (61.5%) that they are confident in their ability to deliver SOS.

**Feasibility.** Finally, 100% of educators strongly agreed (38.5%) or agreed (61.5%) that this program was feasible within their schools.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to assess the feasibility and social acceptability of educators' delivery of StressOFF Strategies, a brief, universal single-session school-based stress management program, to their students and to determine educators' perspectives on program delivery. Specifically, the aims of this study were to 1) evaluate the feasibility and social acceptability of SOS when delivered by educators through students' post-program reports of learning, program satisfaction, understanding of and willingness to use the stress management strategies taught, 2) compare student evaluations of educator versus SOS team program delivery, and 3) assess educators' overall program satisfaction, knowledge of material, and perspectives on the program's feasibility.

The first objective of this study was to assess the feasibility and social acceptability of educators' delivery of SOS through students' post-program reports. Following the educators' delivery of the program, the majority of students indicated that they learned a *medium amount* to a *lot* about stress and stress management. Furthermore, the majority of students rated the SOS program as *good* to *excellent*. When asked about their understanding of the stress management strategies taught and their willingness to use these strategies in the future, the majority of students indicated that they understood the strategies *quite well* to *very well*, and that they were willing to use these techniques *sometimes* to *always*. Based on these high student evaluations, these findings support the feasibility and social acceptability of SOS when delivered by educators.

Many existing stress management programs are lengthy, time consuming, and require additional outside personnel to deliver or assist in the delivery of the program (Fridrici & Lohaus, 2009; Kraag et al., 2006). Furthermore, educators often indicate that they are reluctant to address mental health resiliency in the classroom due to their lack of training, time, and skills (Ekornes, 2015; Reinke, Stormont, Herman, Puri, & Goel, 2011; Stormont, Reinke, & Herman, 2011). These results show that with a small amount of training, educators can deliver a brief school-based stress management program and encourage mental health resilience for their students in their classrooms.

The second objective of this study was to determine if educators' delivery of SOS was comparable with the original delivery of the program by SOS team members. Overall, results from the student evaluations of the educators' program delivery and the SOS team members' program delivery were similar for both groups of presenters. These results demonstrate that the educators were as successful as trained professionals in delivering a stress management program. Although there was a significant difference for the amount students had learned following the program and the students' rating of the program, these differences were minor. Specifically, 80% of students indicated that they learned a *medium amount* to a *lot* following the educators' delivery of the program, compared to 86.5% of students following the SOS team's delivery of the program. Furthermore, 83.2% of students rated the program as *good* to *excellent* when it was delivered by the educators, compared to 88.7% of students following the SOS team's delivery of the program. Consistent with previous literature, when educators are involved in the delivery of the program, the program is well received by students (Frydenberg et al., 2004). As such, these results indicate that educators are able to deliver a brief stress management program as successfully as outside professionals. Interventions for mental health resilience are typically considered to be the role of the mental health professional (e.g., school psychologists); however, these findings suggest that educators can assist mental health professionals in supporting the mental health needs for their students. For instance, educators can lead in promoting and enhancing student well-being through the incorporation of universal stress management programs within their classroom curriculum.

The final objective of this study was to assess educators' overall program satisfaction, knowledge of material, and perspectives on the program's feasibility. Results revealed that all of the educators strongly agreed or agreed that 1) SOS was relevant and met their expectations, 2) the SOS program was beneficial, 3) the SOS training was a valuable professional/personal development experience, and 4) they would recommend SOS to their colleagues. These findings suggest that educators responded positively to their experience in the training of the program.

When asked about their knowledge of material at the follow-up session, the majority of educators strongly agreed or agreed that a) they now know how to deliver SOS, b) they are now comfortable delivering SOS, and c) they are now confident in their ability to deliver the program. These findings imply that with minimal training, educators are able to deliver a brief stress management program to their students. Although many educators have indicated that dealing with mental health problems within their classrooms is a challenge due to minimal skills, training, and insufficient knowledge (Reinke et al., 2011; Stormont et al., 2011), they have also reported that teachers are in an important position in which they can support the mental health needs of their students (Ekornes, 2015). Teachers have also indicated that

mental health promotion should be part of their professional role, particularly when implementing classroom behavioural interventions (Graham, Phelps, Maddison, & Fitzgerald, 2011; Reinke et al., 2011). These findings suggest that if educators are provided with the skills to implement a school-based stress management program, they might be more confident, comfortable, and willing to support students' mental health needs in their classrooms.

Finally, educators were asked to report on the feasibility of this program within their school. All of the educators strongly agreed or agreed that SOS was feasible to implement in their school. As previously mentioned, schools often reject programs that are too demanding or time-consuming due to other school and curricular priorities (Fridrici & Lohaus, 2009; Graham et al., 2011). Therefore, these findings suggest that a less demanding stress management program within the schools can be implemented without disrupting other school commitments.

Despite these findings, there are some limitations that must be considered. Although there were no significant differences in the students' understanding of the strategies taught when delivered by educators and the SOS training team, educators reported that they experienced difficulties explaining the mindfulness-based stress management strategy to their students. Certain strategies can be more easily learned and disseminated to students (e.g., muscle relaxation), however, mindfulness-based strategies may be more difficult to understand and teach. Anecdotally, it was revealed in follow-up discussions that one third of the educators incorporated relaxation exercises in place of the present-moment awareness inherent to mindfulness. In future studies and in efforts to continue educator-delivered stress management programs, a complex and novel notion such as mindfulness may require more time to train, and a targeted evaluation of program fidelity should be included to ensure that the strategy is implemented correctly. Additionally, the focus of the present study was to evaluate the feasibility and social acceptability of SOS as delivered by educators compared to SOS as delivered by SOS team members, but the current design would be enhanced by the inclusion of a comparable control intervention. Although it would have been beneficial to ensure that the samples were equivalent, many of the same schools and regions participated in both studies, demonstrating that these samples are comparable. Finally, one educator from an alternative school for at-risk youth experienced difficulties presenting the SOS program to the students and suggested that the program should be adapted for this specific population. It would be important for future implementations of stress management programs to ensure that the program that is being implemented is relevant for different student populations.

The present study demonstrated the feasibility and social acceptability of an educator-delivered universal brief single-session school-based stress management program for adolescents. The results of this study suggest that it is not essential for an outside presenter or mental health professional (e.g., school psychologist, counsellor) to deliver a stress management program to adolescents; educators can include brief programs such as these within their classrooms with minimal outside training.

The findings from this study have important implications for schools, educators, and teacher education. Primarily, including a stress management program delivered by educators within the school can decrease the cost of the program while still enabling the students to benefit from receiving training in stress

management skills and strategies. Furthermore, educators can now assist school psychologists in supporting the mental health needs of their students. Due to the fact that students spend the majority of their time with their teachers, this study demonstrates that educators can also support students' mental health within their classrooms, in addition to their academics. Finally, the knowledge and skills in the area of stress management gained by the educators can be applied in other school contexts with students, as well as for their own personal benefit.

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# Disempowering Mindfulness: Reflections on Discovering the Veils of Power in Well-Being and Good Intentions

Everardo Carvajal

## Abstract

Despite the widespread popularity of mindfulness as a wellness intervention strategy across educational levels, its proponents are susceptible to countering the intended area of improvement. This article recounts the cumulative reflections of an educator and his attempts to implement mindfulness into high school classes at the Los Angeles County Jail. Beginning with a layout of the physical and social settings, the article examines the ways that unconsciously practicing mindfulness will counter and potentially negate the possible benefits of mindful practice.

## Disempowering Mindfulness: Reflections on Discovering the Veils of Power in Good Intentions

Mindfulness, in varying forms, has gained popularity as a wellness intervention, and its champions have employed mindful practices in settings ranging from clinical treatment to K-12 education (Davis, 2012; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; Keng, Smoski, & Robins, 2011). My aim here is to recount and share my experience cultivating a mindful practice with students in the Los Angeles County Jail. Particularly, I share how a non-mindful attempt at mindfulness inadvertently led me astray. These insights were refined over my doctoral studies as my views developed through courses on educational equity, accountability, diversity, learning, and pedagogy. I begin by explaining how the meta-moment fits into my school's role and classroom routine. Then, I expose some of my misguided attempts to implement mindfulness as a tool for my students' overall well-being.

Mindfulness ought to be defined before moving further. By mindfulness, I defer to Kabat-Zinn's (2003) intentional focus on attention as a deep reflection on the nature of human experience. This rather complex sounding description is sometimes reduced to and understood as meditation. As I have attempted to refer to and teach mindfulness, it is a way for one to focus thoughts and attention towards present-moment circumstances. For example, I have encouraged students to think of the mind as a dynamic thought train that can learn to slow down through deliberate attention and focus on real-time circumstances. This is often relevant given that students' attention in the classroom often needs to be guided away from the many stressful circumstances of life in addition to the extenuating context of incarceration. My goal has always been to offer the practice as a start of class for students to begin the day with a greater focus on school and learning. My ulterior motive, one I have often shared, is that students learn and are repeatedly modeled a tool to leverage against their life circumstances as an alternative to self-destructive behavior. This way, even if a student were to only attend our school for one

week, he or she would be exposed to a potential coping tool that demonstrates a healthier alternative to the types of behaviors many of my students have become accustomed to.

Our school provides a second or third chance for adult students to earn a high school diploma. Additionally, through various channels, students are aligned with relevant resources in the form of employment, housing, and addiction treatment. One particular specialty of the school, however, is its series of life skills courses, which I have now taught for six years. My life skills course targets community reintegration based on what research has indicated as common (Bloom, Owen, & Covington, 2005) needs of incarcerated adults.

The meta-moment is one of several components advanced by RULER's comprehensive emotional intelligence curriculum (Nathanson, Rivers, Flynn, & Brackett, 2016). Although there are other components of the program, I implemented a modified form of the meta-moment. Once the class is seated, and before moving further into the lesson, students pause for three minutes to practice the meta-moment. During our meta-moments, students sit quietly, five per table, inhaling deeply with closed eyes while awash with audible clutter of radio transmissions, speakerphones, running toilets, and slamming steel doors. This is always followed by a flexible five-minute group discussion.

I introduced the meta-moment four years ago to help students morph the curious climate of a jail into an atmosphere learning and collaboration. I adopted the meta-moment hoping to give our students a practical and immediate tool for their circumstances. It was important to me that we institutionalize a space to pause long enough to observe inward. Our version of the practice is different in that it concludes with a formal group discussion about students' internal observations. Reflections elicit emotions that range from remorse to shame and guilt and to optimism or hope. The combination of deep reflection, insightful assignments, and new insight sometimes triggers students to leave the dorm because of what they perceive to be superfluous stress. This gives me reason to believe the meta-moment is especially key for students who are also in highly vulnerable circumstances like incarceration. Further, despite the breadth of available publications and approaches to mindfulness, meditation, and similar practices, teachers and students will benefit by avoiding my mistakes.

## **Purpose**

I began the meta-moment with a single purpose in mind. I believed that my students would gain more from class if they could ready themselves in the first few minutes. Later, I struggled with my unilateral definition. That is, instead of allowing the students to make and create meaning with the practice, I excluded students from the meaning making that otherwise occurred. For instance, when I made the case that it was for calming one's self, I was predisposing the naturally nervous student for failure. Furthermore, the student would have been set up for failure because the uneven personal circumstances were so wide ranging that few were predisposed to easily adapt the practice as it was narrowly defined. The point is that rigidly narrowing a successful moment or reflection is exclusionary and, by definition, counters the nature of a mindful practice. Alternatively, allowing students to discover and create meaning

of the practice ensures the nature becomes inclusionary by observing a more expansive notion of success relative to students' dispositions.

Regrettably, I insinuated that reflection occurred in only one way. And, if students failed to share a reflection that matched my expectations, I acted quickly to summarize their share and call on the next student. This also led me to anticipate a student's reflection so that, if it started turning in a direction I believed was wrong, I shut the student down and did not call on the student during later discussions. I believed the reflection briefly exposed whether the student observed internal dialogue and connected to his or her emotional disposition throughout the momentary self-connection. However, a mindful approach would not force a particular style of reflection, especially considering the diverse circumstances of a large class. I also struggled with wanting to correct students on why they failed to settle into a restful state, dismissing the ambient noise or the environmental and emotional discomfort of incarceration. I justified my silencing on the rare occasion that a student would snipe criticisms towards the custody staff or to prevent student monologues that resembled religious testimony. I was oblivious to the climate I created by seeking a specific type of reflection, and I failed to notice this until one student's uncommon reflection led to her tears and sobbing about how she regretted setting her partner on fire.

After nearly two years of practice, it occurred to me that I had narrowly framed the meta-moments' purpose and unilaterally held the power to define it. I cut off students for their seemingly off-track share. I shut them down and politely informed them that the class was not a venting forum. I told students that the meta-moment was not a confessional. Most likely, your classrooms contrast sharply versus a jail; however, I suspect the difference of social environments is a matter of degree and not of kind. In other words, your students are not likely to be in jail, but they are likely to struggle with how to share, deciding what is shareworthy or whether their thoughts ought to be publicly vented.

The facilitator's preconceived intentions have the potential to sap motivations from the reluctantly sharing student. Later, the facilitator, as I did, may wonder why the student is not motivated to complete assignments. Lisa Delpit (1988) wrote about the silenced dialogue and how the dynamics of power unfold through a teacher's policies and practices. I regret that I have done some silencing. In circumstances like these, I learned that mindful practice has the ability to elicit powerful feelings and set a stage for self-awareness, self-expression, and at times, self-growth. My point is, encourage reflection on the unseen influence of power bound up with asking students to reflect and share. This may better help you navigate the discussions emerging from your students' attempts at mindfulness.

### **Process(es)**

In my attempts to advance mindful practices, I failed to be open to the multitude of processes that could expose students to their inner dialogues. This became progressively clearer with practice as the plurality of processes unfolded as more classes practiced the meta-moment. For example, in the first year, I chose not to ask students to close their eyes during the meta-moment. This would have required a high level of student trust given our open bay classroom and class of 50 to 60 students. Alternatively, I began by asking

students to breathe and focus on their bodies for the three minutes. After practicing for about a year, I realized that, by making all students focus on their bodies, I limited their experiences. After reluctantly acknowledging these repeated examples, I introduced alternate methods as students continued to reflect on which methods yielded useful results. Some were responsive to the focus on breathing, others observed results by focusing on sound, and some found that a visual focus facilitated access to their inner thoughts. Only after the repeated practice and student reflection did I gradually realize that my students have infinite access points to self-reflection.

## Knowing

I admit using mindfulness as an exercise in expelling an unwanted element of a student, such as a low interest in work, excessive talking, or lack of focus. Angela Valenzuela (2010) termed this approach as “subtractive schooling” and cautioned about this deficit-based practice. Only later did I understand the dynamics of power as expressed through demarcation of knowledge and how, beneath the surface, power is asserted in the process. This became especially clear after reflecting on how I expected students to conclude a specific insight about themselves and their *real* problems instead of valuing their unique conclusions.

I assumed that the meta-moment would necessarily reveal students’ internal dialogue. I also misplaced my focus on students being able to reproduce the language of the meta-moment: calming the mind, observing the thoughts, observing the sensation of experience within them. In fact, students quickly excelled in the language, yet I mistakenly assumed that I knew what students would see about themselves by pausing for the meta-moment. For instance, during reflection, I would call on student after student and assume their use of the buzzwords were indicators that they fully understood. On the other end of the spectrum, I believed that, since students could not express themselves with the jargon, they must have lacked the effort we all had put forth. I failed to think about how difficult it would be for someone to articulate an insight they may have previously reserved for only themselves. In short, I identified use of jargon as proof of comprehension, and I saw communication struggles as ignorance and lack of effort. Both were wrong in ways other than mindfulness, though these insights only unfolded sporadically as students were able to express their insights during other classroom interactions.

Aside from the discussed dimension of power, I now understand the subversive nature of rigidly defining and deciding whether and what students ought to know. I no longer see the meta-moments as a tool to remove something from my students for them to access their internal worlds. Now, I aim to value students’ gained insights no matter how far they may be from my anticipated student revelation. This means I no longer need to think about whether a student got it or not. Instead, I am now free to recognize that, despite my wish for students to identify some major internal discord, I can pause and recognize their insights as valuable self-knowledge. I have learned to leave room for students to know, for their insights to be true, and for my intentions for their knowledge to go unsatisfied. The temptation to tell students what they do not know is powerful, but encouraging students to value their preexistent insight is more powerful.

Thus, my rigid practice limited my access to the flexible nature of mindful practice. I now have a broader respect for students' perspectives, purpose, and insight, all of which contributes to what Matsumura, Slater, and Crosson (2008) call a "positive classroom climate" (p. 295). In this way, creating a supportive learning environment is not magic, nor is it skill. It is the result of a dynamic interplay that requires thoughtfulness, openness, and flexibility.

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# Strengths and Challenges of Arts-Based Programming for Individuals With Alzheimer’s and Related Dementias

Sara Clarke-Vivier, Corie Lyford, and Lynn Thomson

## Abstract

Through the perspectives of a museum educator, an art educator, and an educational researcher, this article explores the evolution of shared definitions of “well-being” in the development of a museum- and arts-based program for adults with Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias (ADRD). By piecing together the authors’ first-person reflections on pivotal program design moments with images, participant quotes and reflections, and emerging quantitative data, this bricolage inquiry provides insight into the complex and sometimes competing conceptions of wellness and learning that arise in designing programming with and for this population and their caregivers.

## Museum Programming for Well-Being

The purpose of this article is to shed light on the tensions and complicated relationships between learning and well-being in a museum- and arts-based program for adults with Alzheimer’s disease and related dementias (ADRD) and their caregivers by exploring the collaborative development of one program in a small New England art museum. Alzheimer’s is a progressive and debilitating neurodegenerative disease that affects memory, vision, and dexterity. These cognitive and physiological symptoms can also contribute to social and emotional difficulties, including reduced confidence, mood variations, and feelings of social isolation. As the Baby Boomer generation advances in age, the Alzheimer’s Association anticipates that the number of Americans with Alzheimer’s will increase from the current historic high of 5.4 million to a projected 138 million (Alzheimer’s Association, 2017). These projections, paired with increased attention to the well-being for these of individuals and their caregivers, shed light on the need for the development of diverse and supportive programming opportunities (Marshall & Hutchinson, 2001). It is in this space that community organizations like museums have stepped in (AAM, 2013).

Museum art programs for individuals with ADRD, which focus on engaging individuals in positive, shared learning experiences, were popularized by the Metropolitan Museum of Art’s “Meet me at MoMA” and now exist in varying forms in art and other museums around the world. This type of programming quickly became so popular that in 2013 the American Alliance of Museum (AAM) issued a report called “Museums on Call: How Museums Are Addressing Health Issues,” which devotes a whole section to work with this population. In their overview of programs across the United States, the AAM identified three main activities that museums are implementing for adults with Alzheimer’s: offering special tours, facilitating hands-on art making, and facilitating art experiences designed to trigger memories using

artwork or music as prompts. These programs, generally held in museum settings, are either participatory (characterized by interactive, hands-on participation: art making, and interactive discussion) or nonparticipatory (characterized by more passive activities such as observing art). While most programs are described as supporting individuals with Alzheimer's as a primary focus, many also offer benefits and supports to family members and caregivers (AAM, 2013).

Overall, the goals of museum- and art-based programs for individuals with ADRD are closely linked with ideas of health and well-being. Improvements in quality of life, for example, such as decreases in anxiety, improvements in mood, and development of social connectedness and community, often undergird program goals (Selberg, 2015).

These improvements can be broken into two categories: decreasing social isolation and increasing self-esteem and positive mood for individuals living with ADRD and their caregivers. These goals are achieved through programming that foregrounds the development of communities and networks outside of the home that are less stigmatizing and more social than medical locations (Rosenberg, 2009; Flatt et al., 2015), and thus reduce stigma from disease symptoms (Rosenberg, 2009; Mangione, 2013). By centering these goals, programs aim to create safe spaces for conversation and connection where communities are brought together by disease without being entirely defined by the disease. Self-esteem related goals are supported by providing programming that can sustain interest and engagement but that does not have the disease, or its symptoms, at the center (Flatt et al., 2015; Selberg, 2015); through providing physical and psychological respite for caregivers (Rosenberg, 2009); and by creating an opportunity for equal participation for both caregivers and people with ADRD that affirms and accepts individual voice (Rosenberg, 2009; Selberg, 2015).

Though these programs are often hosted in museum education departments, the overarching objectives seek to strike a (sometimes uncomfortable) balance between the educative, the palliative, and the therapeutic (Selberg, 2015). This balance was one that we wrestled with as we developed the Alzheimer's Café program, a collaboration between the Currier Museum of Art and Easter Seals New Hampshire. The sometimes-uncomfortable tensions between education and well-being emerged at key moments in our programming between stakeholders, practitioners, evaluators, and participants. This paper brings the reader in close to the moments where these complexities were negotiated. In an effort to understand the diversity of voices and experiences at play in these negotiations, we undertake their presentation using a methodological bricolage (Denzin & Lincoln, 1999; Kincheloe, 2005; Rogers, 2012). Here, the interweaving of personal reflection, analytic writing, participant quotes, photographs, and student art images both highlights the artistic goals and aesthetic currents of the Café project and appreciates the complexity of the design experience. Thus, our text centers on a series of moments in an effort to understand "well-being" and "learning" in this context.

## In the Beginning

### Snapshot one: Corie, art program coordinator and instructor

*I have loved making and admiring art since I was a small child. I announced for the first time that I was going to be an art teacher when I was only five years old. My creative side was nurtured and encouraged by all my family, but by my paternal grandmother, my Oma. Oma grew up in the Netherlands where she enjoyed many amazing art opportunities. She grew up in a house where a Rembrandt hung proudly on the wall. She visited museums, took private art lessons, and passed this love, particularly for painting, onto me, her namesake and only granddaughter.*

*In the last few years, my Oma began suffering from dementia. Even as she lost her grasp on names and her knowledge of whether she had eaten breakfast, she maintained her love of art. We filled her room at her nursing home with her own paintings as well as artwork done by my brother and myself. One of the last lucid conversations I had with Oma was about the beauty of nature and how it motivates us to create. We lost my grandmother, at the age of 97, just one week after that conversation.*

*I feel privileged to work with seniors in my job as an art educator. In them I see my grandmother. I understand the peace and joy to be found through the arts because my Oma taught me that.*

### Corie, in the classroom

*I'm fairly nervous as I roll my cart of art supplies down the hallway at the adult care facility. I've taught painting and collage lessons many times, but never to a group of senior citizens with Alzheimer's. I roll my cart into a room that looks like a comfortable, cozy living room at someone's house, including a quilt hung on the wall and a fireplace in the corner. This is the room where many of the ladies that I am about to meet spend most of their day, and it is the room where we will have our art classes. The room is hectic, with half of the women leaving to go to a different program for the time being, and half staying to be a part of our art group. I try to stay out of the way and quietly start setting up trays of paint, paintbrushes, glue sticks, oil pastels, and paper. We'll be doing a Degas-inspired torn paper ballerina collage; I've worked hard to put together a project that will be accessible, manageable, and most importantly for me, fun for all of my students. I start to relax.*

*I look up and notice a woman, one of my students whose name is Doris, looking my way. To be more accurate, she is glaring at me. She angrily demands to know what I'm doing there. I tell her that I'm there to do a fun art project with everyone. She tells me in no uncertain terms that she cannot and will not paint, and that I can't make her.*

*If I was fairly nervous before, I'm terrified now.*

Corie's nerves belie the sheer volume of preparatory work and thought that she and a large interdisciplinary team of others had put into developing this effort. Though the museum had offered on-site programming for individuals with Alzheimer's and their families, it had been largely modeled on nonparticipatory image- and gallery-based discussions of art. Hesitations to include more interactive art making or music into the program hinged largely on anxieties about providing experiences that would support the mission without designing a program that seemed as though it was meant for children, or that felt like art-therapy.



Fig. 1: Corie facilitates a Degas-inspired lesson in the Easter Seals classroom. October 2015. Photo by Barbara Sargent.

The stated mission, to provide accessible creative and social experiences that “connect people to the joys of creativity, to ennoble them with a sense of accomplishment, and to reconnect them to their lives and loved ones through resulting conversations and storytelling” (Currier Museum of Art n.d.) was one we had successfully achieved in a nonparticipatory way. But as an art museum with a strong commitment to art-making education, a hands-on component had to be a part of our next steps. How could we do this without offering programming that was overly simplistic, or perceived as childish or demeaning to the adult participants and their caregivers? A new partnership opportunity with a local adult day program at Easter Seals NH provided the museum and the day program organizers an opportunity to think about how art making could be integrated with the gallery-based programming into a sustained art-centered experience for day program participants with ADRD in ways that supported our goals for well-being while extending program offerings.

Our team, comprising artists, art educators, social workers, direct service providers, program directors, and an educational researcher, spent months defining and fine-tuning a shared mission of connecting patients with ADRD to art. The existing museum-based program became a jumping-off point. We would continue to have a monthly visit to the Currier centered on an opportunity to look closely at and discuss fine art images, and spend time looking in the galleries together. Lynn, one of the Café's facilitators, would choose images that all people might connect to; familiar scenes of families, children, parties, holidays, and pets that would foster participation, sharing, and dialogue. This anchoring museum experience was essential to meeting one of the program's goals of connecting caregivers and loved ones to their family members with ADRD, as well as to one another in a nonclinical setting, with the overall vision that they would come to see the museum as a space in the community that they could safely and confidently navigate at other times.

With 12 participants from Easter Seals New Hampshire's ADRD day program as our participants, we decided to run a three-month pilot program that integrated the established museum visit with weekly art-making classes at the program facility, a comfortable classroom familiar to all. The vision for the project seemed straightforward: three weeks making art in the day program classroom, and a once-a-month field trip to the museum for a visit. The museum's Art Education Director Bruce McColl described the program and its components:

In the classroom, students will be provided the experience of working with professional teachers, inspired by masterworks in the collection, and given the license to explore technique and expression. In this situation, students are afforded a space for self-expression—which is reparative and communicative in nature. In the galleries, as a visitor to masterworks, visitors will be provided the opportunity to assess, question and appreciate our collections. (B. McColl, personal communication, January 2017)

Corie's snapshot reflection and photograph above provide a window into this space; a cozy room, familiar to all participants, where three weeks of art programming would happen between each museum visit. Corie designed the art programming to connect to items in the museum's collection while also maintaining a relaxing atmosphere where individuals could use art as a way to communicate, to engage with different forms of communication, and experience individual success in art making. To our minds, these social experiences centered on art promoted some core components of well-being that are often difficult to maintain for individuals with ADRD; self-expression, positive mood, and social engagement.

The ideas were in place, and the design team felt ready. If participants were socially engaged, participating in the art project, and feeling good, we felt confident that the program would achieve our goals. What it was like when we began was different in ways we perhaps could not have anticipated; the first, Doris's assertion: "You can't make me paint."

## Snapshot two: Sara, educational researcher

*I spent the beginning part of my teaching career working at a non-public residential school with children who had experienced trauma. Our classroom in the woods was separate from the challenges of school, family and community life. In that separation we pursued wellness. My students, adolescent boys called conduct disordered and emotionally disabled often found an opening in the arts. We composed a literary magazine, used the playground theatre to stage an all-male production of *Our Town*, and had rock concerts on a hodgepodge of second-hand musical equipment. I make no claim that anyone was cured, or even transformed in those moments. But we experienced them together and in them we were all more well.*

*Within that separation existed a tension. The space that on one hand granted us freedom and flexibility to pursue wellness did not buffer us from the expectations of the world away from the woods. Students were required to meet state and national standards, to pursue learning that looked and felt like the learning that was so often implicated in their own traumatic experiences and the undoing of their wellness. My role was first to facilitate these experiences, but second do document them and in so doing prove their relevance and demonstrate their worth. Succeeding in this pursuit became the central challenge of my early teaching career, and remains with me in the following moments.*

### Sara, on the periphery

*Doing observational research can be awkward. I have been at the periphery of museum programming all summer, but that space is wider, more open. Here I am, sitting unobtrusively in a small room next to a fireplace, all quilts and programming supplies, watching, noting, questioning, reflecting. Trying to make sense of all the moving parts. It is my goal to devise an evaluation for the program- a means by which we can “prove” to future funders that the work we are doing is worthwhile; that participant well-being is achieved.*

*Today, I am watching participants tear bits of tissue paper, a wide array of pinks, into small tufts and glue them into a large triangle on green paper. These puffs would form the soft skirt of a ballerina, modeled off of a Degas print that Corie has shown the participants at the class’s outset. The atmosphere is quiet but persistent; my observational checklist indicates that all 10 participants are socially engaged in their experiences. An occasional question or giggle erupts. A glib exchange between participants about what they personally know about ladies’ skirts.*

*From the doorway the program director calls me over. She brings me into the adjacent lobby to show me a framed series of paintings, completed by several day program participants and a visiting artist. These are meticulous oil paintings; a red barn in the winter, snowy trees, clear neat brushstrokes, high fidelity to the model. Four precise copies of the immaculate original. I am immediately aware of the ballerinas, each hand-drawn by a participant, and their stubborn indifference to form. Some are blobby and wide, so very tall that their heads bump the margins, some limbless or standing on one thick sturdy leg.*

*With a frank and honest openness, the director asks me a question I am not prepared to answer. “What is the difference between the barns and the ballerinas?” Unsure, I probe for some subtext. “What will their children think when they bring home a fat tissue paper ballerina instead of a neat oil barn?” Her question holds in it an abiding anxiety, but also a loving care, a compassionate understanding of a type of relationship that neither Lynn, Corie, nor I have had to negotiate.*

In just this first week, two tensions emerge. First, what happens when what we think will work to support engagement and enjoyment for participants is met with “You can’t make me”? As educators we’ve all met this challenge before, but something about the rosy optimism with which we approached this project left us surprised at its manifestation here. If participation is the key to both enhancing well-being and learning about art, and one refuses to participate, what can we do? Then, for those who do engage, who tear and paste and shape their ballerinas, what of the product? Although we began unified in shaping what the program would look like, after this first session we realized that despite our shared focus on process, on well-being and participation, we had not avoided the concern about the quality of our final product.



Fig. 2: Participant Barbara's ballerina. October 2016. Photo by Lynn Thomson.

What families and caregivers would think about the participant's art became a topic of major discussion. Originally, having a polished finished product was never in the goal. The program was intended to be process-oriented, grounded in positive pro-social engagement of individuals together in the classroom and with their caregivers in the museum. Some strongly felt that we could choose to have a polished project or an opportunity for self-expression, not both. The more we talked, the more we realized that self-expression was truly at the core of our beliefs about the program's impact, given Alzheimer's particularly devastating impact on an individual's ability to communicate. This communication, however central to our programming, was missing in our team's work. At the end of the day, our collaborators at Easter Seals were still handing art to caregivers who we too would face when they visited us in the museum.

The word we relied on to encompass this concern was “childlike.” There has been some exploratory research comparing the drawing skills of young children to those of adults with Alzheimer’s. While children’s skills improve with age on tasks such as drawing common objects and people, individuals with Alzheimer’s drawings are most reminiscent of those done by four year olds; simple, few details, disorienting, prone to error and omission. Some, like those of the youngest children, lack clear representational intention, scribbles only (Bonoti, Tzouvaleka, Bonotis, & Vlachos, 2015). Even experienced artists exhibit a series of changes and declines in their work as a result of dementia-related symptoms that affect depictions of color, space, and contrast (Gretton & Ffytche, 2014), resulting in art that no longer resembles their own earlier work. While resonant with our experiences, this research could not bridge the gap.

We had to ease the concern about the finished product. How? This question, more than others, shaped our expectations of what would count as strong research. The museum invited Sara to work on this project because of her experience in educational research and her willingness to navigate the complexities of measurement in informal learning environments. The introduction of an additional level of translation, the requirement to provide compelling evidence to an audience that now exceeded the confines of our team to include skeptical caregivers, meant that we would need to speak more than one research language.

## **In the Middle**

### **Snapshot three: Back in the classroom with Corie**

*Fast forward and I’m back in that cozy room with another project. When I enter the room, Doris gives me a big smile and says, “Oh, it’s the art girl.” We are adding tempera paint to canvas to create a beach scene with a sunny sky. My back is turned to the table where Doris sits with three other ladies, but I quickly spin around when I hear Doris let out a loud scream. One of the helpers in the room has tried to add more yellow paint to Doris’ paint tray and squeezed the bottle a bit too hard. The top has flown off and yellow paint has dumped onto the table and onto Doris’ canvas. There is a stunned silence following Doris’ scream. Doris herself breaks it as she bursts out laughing and apologizes to everyone for overreacting. She then takes the excess yellow paint on her canvas and turns it into a sun. She tells the helper not to worry. “I have just added value to my painting. I will sell it for a thousand dollars!” She looks at me, winks, and says, “No, I think two thousand.” How far we’ve come in just a few weeks.*

Moments of clarity, pleasure. In weeks, Doris, who would not be forced to make art, sets off a joyous commotion in the classroom. Corie has adjusted some of her plans as she comes to know her students. Ideas about their skills and deficits, evidenced in their time together and communicated by the day program staff, have given her more to work with. Trust grows in the collaboration, and communication opens. We observe the Easter Seals staff interacting with the participants, and gain confidence in ways to help participants engage with art making. How quiet or loud to speak. Whether to touch someone to get their attention, to guide their hands, to reorient them to the page. How to relax, to use the sense of humor that guides our other relationships, to interact by having fun and keeping it accessible without slipping into the trap of condescension, paternalism.

Some ideas though, Corie cannot accept. An extensive use of stencils, having pre-drawn images on paper to be colored in by the participants, all ideas offered by helpful and hopeful staff attuned to the final product, are nonstarters. Undoubtedly these would yield better products; clearly, this type of support helped shape those neat little barns. Corie understood, however, that these tools would interfere with participant expression, with the type of joyful, social engagement we saw coming from more open experiences. Although tools were sometimes thoughtfully used to ensure that participants were successful in their projects, there had to be a balance between help from staff that ensured success and allowing for self-expression from the participants. It was also important to realize that “having success” in a project meant that each participant was able to complete a piece that they felt happy with and enjoyed doing, not creating a polished product that looked just like the teacher's sample piece. Since family members weren't a part of the art-making process, it became increasingly clear that for us to maintain the integrity of our collaborative vision, we had to find a way to share the process.

Health researcher Christine Putland (2008) makes the case that though feelings of joy and pleasure are among the most important and powerful outcomes of doing arts-based work, they can be difficult to quantify and measure. This is particularly the case in fields that focus on ways of understanding experience through medical or social models. As individuals immersed in the arts, we were attuned to these fleeting and qualitative experiences, used to describing them to people who wondered about the value of our work, but were not prepared to measure them in a way we believed would bridge the divide between a fat ballerina and a concerned caregiver. When Pam, the Program Coordinator at Easter Seals, arrived at a meeting with the Quality of Interactions Schedule (QUIS) (Dean, Proudfoot, & Lindesay, 1993), we knew we were getting somewhere. Here, a validated measure that was being rolled out in the rest of the program could give a different dimension to our process, a numeric sense of what was happening as those art projects were being undertaken.

The QUIS was imperfect, as measurement tools tend to be. We were not staffed to have multiple raters, and as such had to be wary of what we reported in terms of validity. In a small room with so many people interacting, needing, working, helping, it could be hard to ensure that our periodic check-ins were happening systematically, that we had all the data points we would need to tell the story. Integrating this tool into our work, however, provided another braid in our narrative. We could say that people were engaged 90% of the time, and that 30% of that time was positive, social engagement, the type that resonated with our well-being goals.

Numbers complemented thick descriptions. Lesson plans contextualized shredded paper ballerinas. Quotes enlivened photographs. Art informed education and both were shaped by principles of health science. We came to understand that strong research needed to hold open these dichotomies and embrace interdisciplinary. Demonstrating meaning making in relationship to wellness required embracing a complex data research and data collection plan. So with observations and photos and paintings and quotes we documented the moments. The more we looked for well-being the more we saw: a shifting mood from the beginning to end of class, giggles, memories and retellings of stories and jokes, intense but peaceful concentration, a new willingness to experiment, to tolerate messy hands or lines that weren't quite straight.

The documents which serve here as foundation for our writing became building blocks upon which open communication and critical reflection, revision, design, collaboration, and flexibility were built by participating parties. Our committee meetings were now informed by all types of “products”; participant art and observations and quotes and numbers. Slowly, the conversations about how we knew we were succeeding became decoupled from the art leaving the classroom. This was also the way that we came to settle in on our shared conception of well-being.

While collaboration allowed us to hit our stride with the day program participants, the first museum café program would be the litmus test of our ability to create these powerful moments of clarity, collaboration, and joy both in a novel environment and under the watchful gaze of participating caregivers and family members. Everyone’s comfort zones would be pushed.

#### **Snapshot Four: Lynn, museum educator**

*I know that art is a way to connect people. I have been fortunate enough in my career to work with individuals and groups who share that belief; through our work my commitment to it has been sustained. I was fortunate enough in my career to work in collaboration with a school that emphasized children as teachers in their own learning and encourage adults to listen to children’s interests and use that as inspiration for how the classroom is structured. My collaborators believed in honoring the importance of what all individuals, regardless of age or skills, bring to the table. This belief was reiterated for me when I worked closely with Vietnam Veterans to develop programs in conjunction with an exhibition of photographs from the Vietnam War. Through careful listening in often very difficult conversations, we developed programs that involved veterans as the experts in the galleries and in the classroom and honored their experiences, often so different from our own. As I watched veterans and museum patrons have meaningful and powerful conversations, I was reminded again of the power of art to bring people together.*

*In the Alzheimer’s Cafe I am doing something that would make my grandmother proud. As I watch her memory deteriorate and her anxiety grow, I am grateful for time with her that is social and that does not center around her illness. I work on this program and hope that through the power of art and discussion I am able to provide moments of joy – I know firsthand how important these moments are.*

### Lynn, in the gallery

*Each week when I plan the images to look at in the gallery I am nervous. I wonder if I have picked the right art works and the best questions to accompany the work that will elicit conversation. I wonder what people will say. This week we are looking at images that relate to sports and games. The theme is broad enough that everyone can connect in some way. Just last week, Corie had participants make and paint clay basketballs.*

*The group enters the room and settles in, greeted by myself and some volunteers who offer light refreshments. As she entered, Roberta seemed unhappy to be at the museum. She was agitated, posturing towards the staff member who accompanied her, resistant to enter. Once all are in their seats I start the discussion by saying hello, welcoming them and then looking at an image on the screen. Roberta's body language relaxed as the group opened up in discussion. She even participated. However after a while she became disinterested again and saying "This is stupid, why aren't we looking at the art work." Roberta was eager to leave.*

*We finished our discussion and went in to the galleries. Roberta's entire posture changed. She stood a taller, her face lit up. She engaged in the discussion.*

*"This is phenomenal!" she said.*

*"This is what I majored in.... What you want to do here is look at the dynamics of the picture, follow the lines" she told me.*

*"I'm analyzing the art work – that's what you do when you look at art," she told her friends.*

*Roberta assisted me in leading the rest of the gallery discussion.*

Here for the first time was an unmediated relationship between Lynn and café family members. With all the anxiety around making meaningful experiences, emphasizing the process over the product, with the fear of being perceived as patronizing, Lynn took the risk, made the connection, and joy emerged. Roberta remembered, cared, shared, engaged, led. She stood taller. Her face lit up.



Fig. 3: Lynn leads a discussion of Marisol's *The Family* with the Café participants at the Currier Museum of Art. April 2016. Photo by Sara Clarke-Vivier.

## **In the End: Well-Being in Wide View**

The pilot program continued to evolve and unfold as we grew, shifted, and accepted the unknown, the unpredictable, the fluid, and flexible definitions of well-being. Emerging from a series of beliefs about the power of art, supported by a robust research literature demonstrating that participation in community arts programs is associated with improvements in older adult's physical and social well-being (Phinney, Moody, & Small, 2014) and now finally borne out in our daily experiences, the team was faced with a final programming challenge.

The group had met for three months and made numerous art projects and had wonderful discussions about art. Now what? As a way to celebrate the program and to share the art that participants created, we decided to have an exhibition of the artwork in the Currier's Community Gallery space. Currier and Easter Seals NH staff spent a great deal of time in the weeks leading up to the exhibition discussing the shape of the show and what we did, and did not, want the exhibition's message to be. The biggest concern was that if we simply put the work on the walls it might elicit a negative reaction. Again, anxieties that people, particularly caregivers, might think that the end product wasn't "good," emerged all around. Though we had worked hard to mitigate against these fears internally, we still harbored doubts about our ability to communicate the well-being of these participants to loved ones. It was important that the participants and family members felt good about the program and appreciated the value of the process of making the art over the end result. The challenge became in how to put that complex story in a visual form for everyone to see. Additionally, since the exhibition would be on view in a public space within the museum we also wanted to be sure the exhibition would resonate with general visitors on a deeper level than "how nice, what a great program."

We would display the artwork, photos of the group making the art, and quotes from the participants. All of these would assist in illustrating the process. We also chose to include information about Alzheimer's as a way to educate viewers about the disease and its progression. All of these elements—quotes, photos, art, and definitions—were interwoven throughout the space to tell a story about well-being. That story, more than the art, became the center point of the exhibition.

## **“Experience This Moment”**

The day of the exhibition opening staff remained apprehensive about how it would be received by participants and family members. As guests entered, the space instantly filled with a palpable sense of joy. Artists were finding pictures of themselves and reading their quotes to one another. They were showing off their art to friends and family who looked on with pride and excitement. The opening highlighted the process and the importance of a program that allows for self-expression and positive social interaction with others.

In three simple words, the exhibition's title tells something of our story.

### **Snapshot Five: Lynn at the “Experience This Moment” gallery opening**

*The long, narrow Community Gallery hallway is full of participants and caregivers all looking for images of themselves. Smiles and joyful energy fill the space as family members talk with one another about the art and the quotes and as participants excitedly talk amongst their peers about what they are seeing. We read their reflections on the wall:*

*First of all, making art is challenging. I find it fascinating; it is something different that I've really never devoted time to before. I like painting because I feel like I'm accomplishing something. You don't necessarily have to have a good memory to make art: you need to have concentration on what you are doing. I would like to do more art. (Al, an Adult with Early Onset Dementia)*

*Doing art is a lot of fun. I love to make art so people can enjoy it and because it is a good thing to keep busy. You don't need to have a good memory to make art; I can handle it the way I am. I sit there, take the paper, design it, and make it. It makes me feel very good and I am glad I can still do it. I've been doing art for a long time and I'm not about to stop now. (Lorraine, an Adult with Early Onset Dementia)*

*Many did not remember being photographed, or their art making process, or the sharing [of] their perspectives in final interviews. But it didn't matter. People were excited and proud of their art. Caregivers saw the whole picture.*

Here, in the voices of senior participants, another set of definitions emerges. Art making provided Al with the opportunity to explore something new, to spend concerted time and effort on a different project, to stretch his concentration, and to acknowledge that his memory challenges needn't interfere with any of these endeavors. For Lorraine, enjoyment and positive feelings emerge from art making. She is connected to her past, and to others, through art. Both Al and Lorraine imagine their own futures as including art making; they're not about to stop now.

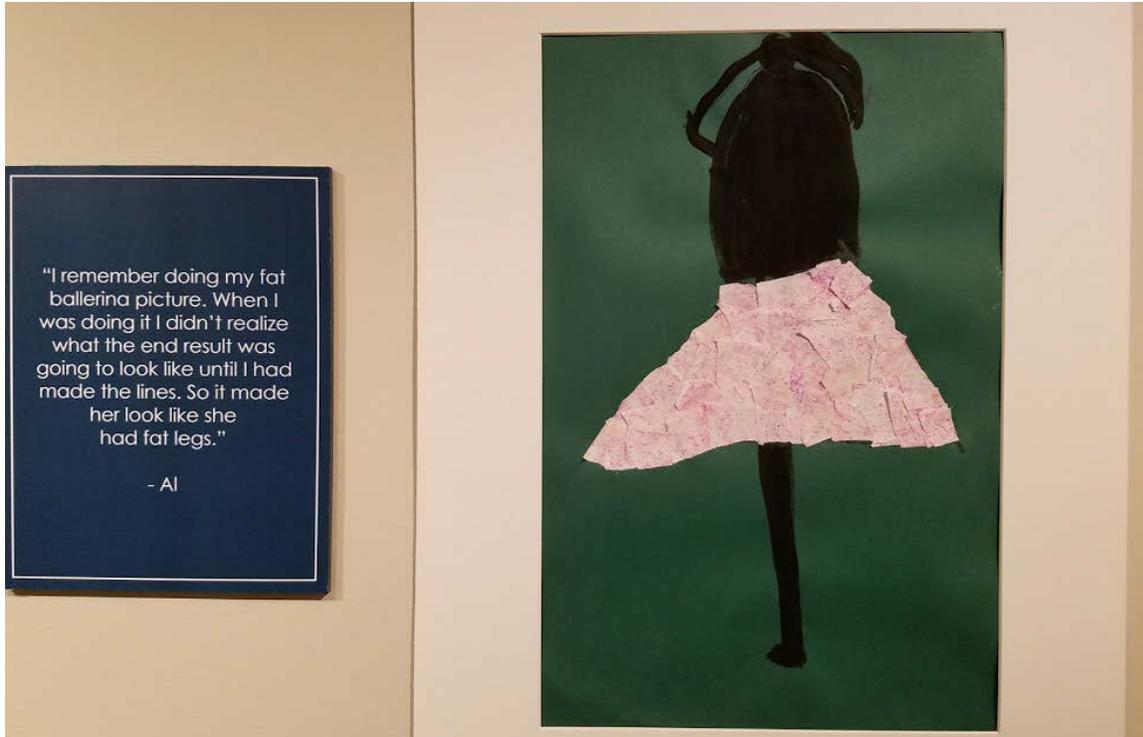


Fig. 4: Al's Degas-inspired ballerina and reflection quote from "Experience this Moment" gallery exhibition. Currier Museum of Art. May 2016. Photo by Sara Clarke-Vivier.

Here, too, Al knows his ballerina is different. He acknowledges that the process was murky for him, and that his ballerina emerged strange as a result. When Lynn and Corie decided to put this quote next to the ballerina in the gallery, they made space for the open acknowledgment of the strangeness by those others, namely the caregivers, who may have struggled with the nature of their parents' work early on. As we revisited this image as authors, Sara asked Corie to recall the context of Al's comment. "Al knew he was being funny," She said. "He wanted to make people laugh every time he talked about his fat ballerina. Ballerinas can't be fat, he would say, they have to dance. He had cracked a really successful joke, and he returned to it time and again."

The gallery opening provides us with concentrated, positive feedback from participants and caregivers alike. After it all, Laurie, the director of the Easter Seals program, whose care was demonstrated as she showed Sara the neat red barns, told us that to her, the process was directly related to participant wellness.

*There is a direct correlation between art and wellbeing. The use of art can help people with mood as it can promote relaxation, improve mood and may help concentration and restlessness. For people who may not have verbal skills it is a way to express themselves- a need to be heard and recognized and that is always good for the soul. Art is a non-judgmental medium where there is no right or wrong and when done with others, it is an opportunity to engage in a social setting. (L. Duff, personal communication, January 2017)*

Art is nonjudgmental. There is no right or wrong when done socially with others.

## In Closing

### Snapshot six: Corie at the “Experience This Moment” gallery opening

*I'm chatting with the wife of one of my students. When I meet people from this program, I always assume that they have been married to their spouses for a long time because they are senior citizens. In this case I'm wrong. This wife, whose husband is lively and sweet and funny and in a fairly advanced stage of dementia, has only been married to him for about six years. The Alzheimer's began to manifest after they had been married for just one year, completely changing their ability to communicate. She shares that because it came on so quickly and after they had known each other for only a relatively short period of time, she has had to get to know her husband in other ways. One way has been by seeing her husband's artwork from this program, both the finished piece at the end as well as photos of him working which show his methodical and thoughtful process. It is an emotional conversation. As we finish talking, her husband, who had been sitting quietly during most of the reception, spontaneously breaks into song with a big, happy smile on his face. Although bittersweet, this exchange is a moment of joy.*

Experience this moment.

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# ***Fitspiration* to Inspire or to Mire? A Review of the Literature and Educational Implications**

Joanne M. Crossman

## **Abstract**

*Fitspiration* has been positioned as an online interchange featuring images and text designed to inspire fitness and healthy eating. Given its ubiquity as an emerging social media trend, and its unintended impact on body image disturbance mediated by social comparison, *Fitspiration* has been understudied. This review draws on theoretical perspectives associated with traditional and new media impact on young women's body image concerns, and overviews strategies to engage students in adopting a healthier body image. The manuscript also provides educational implications and directions for practice, particularly guided by media literacy models that may serve to intervene with body comparisons, inspire deeper learning and a renewed vision of fitness, health, and well-being.

## **Background**

Body image research extended to newer media has recently included a preliminary exploration of fitness imagery and motivational phrases known as *Fitspiration* (an amalgamation of *fit* and *inspiration*). *Fitspiration* content is widely depicted on the Internet, and on social media platforms including Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, and Snapchat. The professed antidote for *Thinspiration* (photos and captions that glorify eating disorders), *Fitspiration* purportedly promotes health, well-being, and exercise, yet has been associated with female body image concerns; a relationship mediated by social comparison (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; 2016; Vogel, 2015; Adams, 2014; Kite & Kite, 2012; Abena University, 2013). Considering its prevalence and unintended negative influence upon our students' multimedia culture, *Fitspiration* has received limited review.

In fact, "little is known about women's responses to models presented in an active form, with a focus on athleticism and performance" (Mulgrew & Hennes, 2014, p. 1). Therefore, with particular emphasis on *Fitspiration* content, this paper reviews literature, providing insights into the subtle effects that traditional media and social media exert on female body-perception, and overviews strategies to engage adolescent and young women in adopting a healthier body image. The manuscript also provides educational implications and directions for practice, particularly guided by media literacy models that may serve to intervene with body comparisons, inspire deeper learning and a renewed vision of fitness, health, and well-being.

## Theoretical Perspectives: Media Influence on Body Concerns

Extensive literature documents associations between media and female body dissatisfaction (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015; Perloff, 2014; Holland & Tiggemann, 2016). Historically, female body image disturbances have been largely attributed to viewing thin, attractive models depicted in mass media, including magazines, TV ads, TV entertainment programs, movies, and music videos. Models have traditionally been portrayed in passive form with a focus on aesthetic qualities of the body. Much of the research was mediated by Objectification Theory (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; McKinley & Hyde, 1996), which purported that Western society sexually objectifies the female body for the pleasure and evaluation of others. Exposure to objectified images has long been associated with self-objectification and body dissatisfaction (Fredrickson & Roberts, 1997; Harper, Sperry, & Thompson, 2008). In turn, self-objectification has been found to affect mental health, including a heightened risk for disordered eating, negative body esteem, and negative psychological well-being.

Numerous studies were also mediated by Bandura's (2009) Social Cognitive Theory, the Mass Communication-focused Cultivation Model (Morgan, Shanahan, & Signorielli, 2009), and the Sociocultural Perspective on body image (Thompson, Heinberg, Altabe, & Tantleff-Dunn, 1999; Tiggemann, 2011). These studies suggested media messages can impart unrealistic images of female beauty. Internalizing such distorted images has been associated with body dissatisfaction, a key predictor of disordered eating (Smolak & Thompson, 2009; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015).

Because there is a natural tendency for young people to compare themselves to peers and others, it is appropriate to consider Festinger's Social Comparison Theory as the central explanatory framework in which to place *Fitspiration* imagery and phrases purported to promote fitness. Social Comparison Theory maintained that people have the tendency to self-evaluate, self-enhance, and self-improve by comparing themselves to others. Whether the effects of such comparisons are positive/motivational or negative/demotivational may depend on whether one *assimilates to*, or *contrasts away* from the model of comparison. The theory further purported that people are primarily motivated to know themselves, and have a basic need to maintain a stable and accurate self-view through feedback about their performance and characteristics.

Festinger (1954) postulated that people self-evaluate by making lateral comparisons to others with standards similar to their own on particular critical dimensions. Next, downward comparisons serve as self-enhancement, create, and maintain a positive self-image. These comparisons are made with others we outperform. A third need fulfilled by social comparison is self-improvement. Here, people seek upward comparisons of standards depicted by others we perceive to be superior.

For example, assuming that comparing oneself to an idealized, thin model constitutes an upward comparison and to a heavy model, a downward comparison, we can consider *assimilation effects* and *contrast effects*. Mathras, Loveland, and Mandel (2013) suggested that comparing weight and shape with a moderately thin model may garner *assimilation effects towards* a possibly attainable ideal. However,

*contrast effects away from* dramatically thin models have largely been associated with negative self-esteem and low body satisfaction.

Attaining an *accurate* self-view towards improved fitness and overall health and well-being may be both warranted and useful. Yet, comparisons to a false, unattainable fitness ideal created by “manicuring the online self...to adhere to the mainstream aesthetics,” could lead to a sense of inadequacy when failing to live up to idealized online personas (Manago, Ward, Lemm, Reed, & Seabrook, 2014, p. 10). Such comparisons can influence thin-ideal ideation, body dissatisfaction, and eating pathology.

### **Social Media and Body Concerns: Thin-Ideal Internalization, Body Dissatisfaction, and Eating Pathology**

During its 2015 survey period, Statista found in North America, 16-24 year olds spent approximately 200 minutes daily on mobile devices. Among high school graduates, when using mobile devices, the most popular social networks and apps included text messaging, followed by Instagram, then Facebook and Snapchat (Statista, 2016a). Statista’s (2016b) worldwide data ranked by number of active users showed approximately 2 billion Internet users utilize social networks in highly diverse platforms including Facebook, and microblog rapid communications such as Tumblr or Twitter. Some social networks focus on community; others highlight and display user-generated content.

The most popular network worldwide as of April 2016, was Facebook with 1.59 billion monthly active users. Eighth-ranked photo-sharing app Instagram had over 400 million monthly active accounts. Blogging service Tumblr had more than 555 million active bloggers. Due to a constant presence in their users’ lives, social networks have a decidedly strong social impact. The blurring between offline and virtual life as well as the concept of digital identity and online social interactions are some aspects that have emerged in recent discussions (Statista, 2016b).

It is therefore increasingly important to study potential relationships between social media use and body image concerns. These relationships continue to be aligned with appearance comparisons (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2015; Fardouly, Diedrichs, Vartanian, & Halliwell, 2015a; Fardouly et al., 2015b; Kim & Chock, 2015; Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). Most studies of traditional and social media impact on body image and disordered eating have been conducted using female samples. However, in their review of 20 studies investigating the influence of social media on body image and disordered eating, Holland and Tiggemann (2016) found disturbances reported among both males and females. The majority of these studies focused on undergraduate or high school students, whom they contended are prone to such ideation. Measures included overall usage time, frequency of use, and number Facebook “friends.” Disturbingly, Holland and Tiggemann (2016) also reported that longitudinal studies of social media use indicated by these measures resulted in increased levels of body image concerns from four to 18 months later.

Perloff’s 2014 research further suggested that women low in self-esteem and high in perfectionism, appearance-based self-worth, or thin-ideal internalization will turn to social media for reassurance and

validation regarding physical and social attractiveness. Peer-based social media contexts, he contended, invite social comparison to attractive peers and the thinness ideal.

Indeed, imagery, text, and *Thinspiration* content have been shown to exacerbate thin-ideal internalization, body dissatisfaction, and eating pathology. A disquieting trend, *Thinspiration* (an amalgamation of *thin* and *inspiration*) is a confluence of images depicting emaciated women accompanied by quotes designed to inspire weight loss and promote an eating-disordered lifestyle (Borzekowski, Schenk, Wilson, & Peebles 2010; Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). *Thinspiration* promotes weight loss in a manner that glorifies dangerous behaviors consistent with eating disorders (Lewis & Arbuthnott, 2012; National Eating Disorders Association, 2016).

For example, the Pro ANA Lifestyle Forever webpage (n. d.) readily available in November 2016 featured the ANA (Anorexia) Religion and Lifestyle Thin Commandments:

1. If you aren't thin, you aren't attractive
2. Being thin is more important than being healthy
3. You must buy clothes, cut your hair, take laxatives; anything to make yourself look thinner
4. Thou shall not eat without feeling guilty
5. Thou shall not eat fattening food without punishing afterwards
6. Thou shall count calories and restrict intake accordingly
7. What the scale says is the most important thing
8. Losing weight is good, gaining weight is bad
9. You can never be too thin
10. Being thin and not eating are signs of true willpower and success.

Perloff (2014) argued that thinness-inspiring websites, blogs, and images like *Thinspiration* specifically promote eating disorders, including anorexia and bulimia. Perloff's research found that Facebook, Instagram, and Pinterest, "allow for creating and exchange of messages on particular body image-related content, exemplified by *Thinspiration* blogs and pro-eating disorder material" (p. 368). Mabe, Forney, and Keel (2014) noted social media, "provides a constant, active space to engage in social comparison with peers who may simultaneously portray and reinforce the thin-ideal" (p. 520). They found women with greater eating pathology reported engaging in appearance-focused behaviors such as comparing their appearance with friends' pictures and untagging their own unflattering photos, perhaps so as to avoid the possibility of others' making downward comparisons with them.

Prieler and Choi (2014) argued it is necessary to differentiate social media use driven by entertainment or socializing, with use driven by specific body image needs and vulnerabilities. For example, a young woman using social media primarily for socializing may encounter pictures of thin women posted by her peers. That content may be more or less influential in eliciting body dissatisfaction depending on her vulnerability factors (level of self-esteem or the centrality of appearance to her self-worth). In contrast, individuals fixated on the thinness ideal may use social media to seek gratification specific to their body

image concerns. By encountering pro-eating disorder sites, they may experience greater dissatisfaction, yet also a positive effect through social support from like-minded individuals (Csipke & Horne, 2007).

Given their propensity to engage in social media's interactive format and content, young adults, particularly women, can be influenced by negative social comparisons, and peer normative processes, thereby significantly influencing body image concerns (Perloff, 2014).

For example, Lewallen and Behm-Morawitz (2016) described Pinterest as a feminized social media form: "a content curation website analogous to an online vision board" (p. 6) where users may collect and share images towards upward social comparison. They found the sum of fitness-focused pinboards followed by study participants predicted whether they were influenced to engage in extreme weight-loss tactics such as fad dieting.

Williams and Ricciardelli (2014) argued that social media exposes users to

unrealistic body images, modelling, pressure to conform, gender-typed socialization, objectification of the body, internalization of appearance ideals, increased negative affect that results from viewing unrealistic images of the body, social comparisons, interactions with peers and other normative influences, behaviors and body change strategies to improve oneself, and compensatory motivations such as disordered eating as a way to validate one's self-concepts. (p. 2)

However, Williams and Ricciardelli (2014) asserted the processes underlying the ways social media promotes body image concerns appear to be no different from other media forms. In fact, they contended it is not yet known if social media exacerbates the effects of these processes because the images are omnipresent, or if we have become desensitized and pay less attention to the messages.

Yet, various unique characteristics of social media may contribute to any effects it has on body image. For example, social media features the users themselves, in addition to models and celebrities. Also, users often upload the most attractive images of themselves (easily edited and enhanced), and remove those they perceive as unattractive (Zhao, Grasmuck, & Martin, 2008; Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016). Therefore, social media provides a digital platform for users to present the version of themselves they want their social network to see (Zhao et al., 2008). "Users become vigilant about how they will appear to others as they reflect, edit, and manicure self-portrayals for an audience of followers" (Manago et al., 2014, p. 10). Consequently, such edited, enhanced images may convey idealized images of social peers (Kim & Chock, 2015).

Social media may also reinforce the thin-ideal internalization through various posts, "likes," and comments related to appearance, also possibly affecting how users feel about their appearance (Carey, Donaghue, & Broderick, 2014; Mabe et al., 2014). Relative to content on Twitter and Pinterest, Ghaznavi and Taylor (2015) suggested thin-ideal images provide examples for self-comparison and could perpetuate belief that these bodies are relatively more common than others, thereby associating disordered eating attitudes and body dissatisfaction. Moreover, social media is generally used to interact

with one's peers, and peers have been shown to influence risk for body dissatisfaction and eating pathology (Zalta & Keel, 2006; Keel, Forney, Brown, & Heatherton, 2013).

Social media users actively search for contact, forge social ties, and seek information about others, (Tufekci, 2008). This is known as "social grooming" (Dunbar, 1996; Tufekci, 2008). Social grooming behaviors such as checking friends' profiles, commenting, and leaving messages may increase opportunities for viewing enhanced images, thereby leading to a greater likelihood of comparing one's appearance to others. This social grooming may correlate with body image concerns more strongly than simple exposure time (Kim & Chock, 2015). The comparisons are often made with people who strategically portray themselves in the most positive fashion, such as those depicted in *Fitspiration* imagery.

### ***Fitspiration*: Negative, Unintended Impact on Body Image Mediated by Social Comparison**

Unlike *Thinspiration*, *Fitspiration* (an amalgamation of *fit* and *inspiration*) was purportedly designed to inspire a strong and positive body image through exercise and healthy eating. *Fitspo* imagery is widely available on the Internet, and Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) found it most notably present on Instagram, which is often linked to other social media accounts, thereby increasing dissemination of this imagery. In fact, Instagram users may be subject to fitness-related messages they did not even opt to see when their peers post pictures, or if a friend "liked" an image on Facebook.

On Tumblr, users can find images by searching for tags like "*Fitspo*," on Pinterest, users can pin *Fitspiration* images and text, and on Facebook users can share pictures of self and peers. *Fitspiration* imagery may also target advertising. Stieben (2013) explained that targeted social media advertisements are garnered through users' profile information, location, and browsing history.

Food or exercise mentioned on social media may result in users being presented with related advertisements.

Adams (2014) described *Fitspiration* as an online community of bloggers and social media accounts that encourage weight loss, diet, and exercise by sharing success stories, active lifestyle and diet tips, photos, and rules. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) contended, "Overall health and well-being are strongly endorsed through promotion of healthy eating, exercise, and self-care. The general philosophy is one emphasizing strength and empowerment, and strong is the new skinny" (p. 62).

Conversely, health blogger, Arnot (2016) argued *Fitspo* is actually making us *less* active. She cautioned that beginners who have never done much physical activity; those insecure about their body, embarrassed or unsure; those who believe they are uncoordinated or not sports-like; the ill, injured, or disabled; and the vast majority of people who cannot identify with *Fitspo* models find *Fitspiration* so overzealous, un-relatable, so *all or nothing* that they choose nothing.

Additionally, simply searching “fitness” or “*Fitspo*” may lead users to *Thinspiration* content (Ghaznavi & Taylor, 2015). *Fitspiration* images posted on Instagram also share common characteristics found to be negative for body image. In particular, the clear overrepresentation of the ideal body shape for women and men, the overall focus on appearance, and the presence of objectifying features have been linked to poorer body image and disordered eating (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016).

Moreover, the majority of women in the images were found to have a generally unattainable tone, relatively thin figure, albeit less thin and more muscular than models portrayed in fashion magazines. They cautioned this particular fitness-figure implies only thin and toned bodies can be fit, contending *Fitspiration* imagery attempts to inspire women toward health and fitness by focusing on appearance-related body conceptualization (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Body Conceptualization Theory suggests the body may be evaluated in two ways: BAO or BAP (Franzoi, 1995). Viewing the body as an object (BAO), the aesthetic value of its discrete parts is emphasized. Viewing the body as a process (BAP), the functional attributes (strength, flexibility, and endurance) are emphasized. Abbott and Barber (2010) found women place great value on aesthetic qualities of their bodies (BAO), correlating with lower self-esteem and increased depressed mood. However, greater value placed on the body’s functional aspects was positively related to self-esteem. Similarly, Strelan, Mehaffey, and Tiggemann (2003) found exercise motivated by appearance, rather than health or enjoyment, was associated with negative body image.

Mulgrew and Hennes (2014) surmised that females who viewed images of thin and attractive models reported similar and negative outcomes regardless of focus on form or function. Detrimental effects (greater depression, anger, and feelings of fatness) were reported by women with a high desire to emulate the athletic physique after viewing images of models, compared to women who expressed less desire for an athletic body shape.

These findings suggest that images with a focus on BAP appear to elicit reflection on the object dimensions of a body. *Fitspiration* images often have objectifying features such as a focus on particular body parts (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2015).

Arnot (2016) recommended unfollowing, hiding, and deleting *Fitspo* messaging that makes us feel anxious, insecure, alienated, or obsessive, and commenting to companies rebuking unrealistic marketing strategies. She advocated choosing movement that is enjoyable, feels good, improves function, or increases competence at something we enjoy. Arnot contended progress and appearance are disparate, and movement is only one element of good health, which takes many forms.

Recently, Mulgrew (2016) argued displaying images of overly fit females to promote exercise could be counterproductive, refuting the common assumption that *Fitspiration* photographs promote a healthier body image. Participants in her study who viewed fitness model imagery reported feeling worse about themselves than did those who viewed traditional models. Mulgrew concluded that fitness images should not be assumed less harmful to body image, cautioning that women should value their body’s functionality beyond appearance.

In sum, it appears fitness imagery has not evolved beyond the one same body type: slim, toned, and attractive. Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) contended, “Exposure to *Fitspiration* leads to negative body image, and this relationship is mediated by social comparison... *Fitspiration* avowedly designed to promote healthy eating and exercise can have (unintended) negative consequences on body image” (p. 66).

### **Regulations, Disclaimers, and Referrals**

While regulating health and fitness-related social media content may be an option for dealing with potentially harmful effects, doing so is challenging (Carrotte, Vella, & Lim, 2015). Some Thinspiration communication has been banned or censored, with varying degrees of success. Spiegel (2013) rated poorly the big social networks’ enforcement of banned pro-eating disorder content. For example, Instagram (D rating) rendered #Thinspiration, #probulimia, and #proanorexia tags unsearchable. Yet tags such as #thinspire are easily searched there, many portraying images of skeletal bodies and cutting.

Various disclaimers and content advisories are offered by social networks such as Tumblr and Instagram, as are referrals to links including the National Eating Disorders Association (NEDA) website and various recovery resources. NEDA has worked with many major social media platforms to help develop community guidelines, and to identify *Thinspo* and *Fitspo* content promoting disordered eating or self-harm behavior. For example, NEDA (2016) recommended that media platforms highlight the dangers, but avoid sensationalizing the issue.

Help your readers to understand that pro-anorexia and pro-bulimia sites are very dangerous, both for those who have an eating disorder and those who do not, but may be vulnerable:

Research indicates providing numbers for lowest weights or goal weights, and showing graphic images glorifying extreme thinness can be triggering. Individuals struggling with an eating disorder might believe they need to reach the published “low weights” before qualifying for getting help. Individuals susceptible can also use this number as a goal weight and sink deeper into illness. Publishing calorie counts and detailing specific behaviors for weight loss are also dangerous... and could result in behaviors that put the individual at serious risk for health complications, further entrenching the eating disorder (NEDA, 2016).

However, specific guidelines for health and fitness-related social media content are not immediately apparent, although some platforms specifically admonish imagery and text relevant to disordered eating. In part, these general standards were available at the time of this review.

Facebook Community Standards (2016)

We don’t allow the promotion of self-injury or suicide. We work with organizations around the world to provide assistance for people in distress. We prohibit content that promotes or encourages suicide or any other type of self-injury, including self-mutilation and eating disorders...

#### Instagram Community Guidelines (2016)

The Instagram community... is often a place where people facing difficult issues such as eating disorders, cutting, or other kinds of self-injury come together to create awareness or find support. We try to do our part by providing education in the app and...in the Help Center...Encouraging or urging people to embrace self-injury is counter to this...support, and we'll remove it or disable accounts if it's reported to us. We may also remove content identifying victims or survivors of self-injury if the content targets them for attack or humor.

#### The Twitter Rules (2016)

You may encounter someone considering suicide or self-harm on Twitter. When we receive reports that a person is threatening suicide or self-harm, we may take a number of steps to assist them, such as...expressing our concern and the concern of other users on Twitter or providing resources such as contact information for our mental health partners.

#### Tumblr Community Guidelines (2015)

Don't post content that actively promotes or glorifies self-harm... or encourages others to: cut or injure themselves; embrace anorexia, bulimia, or other eating disorders; or commit suicide rather than seeking counseling or treatment...online communities can be extraordinarily helpful to people struggling with these difficult conditions. We aim for Tumblr to...facilitate awareness, support and recovery, and we will remove only those posts or blogs that cross...into active promotion or glorification of self-harm.

#### Pinterest Acceptable Use Policy (2016)

Pinterest is a place to get inspired...promoting dangerous behavior detracts from that. We don't allow anything that promotes self-harm, eating disorders or hard drug abuse. Sometimes people want to share their experiences...as a way of helping others who are struggling...We just don't want to encourage harmful behaviors.

Snapchat Community Guidelines (2016): "What not to Snap: Threats- Intimidating people is not okay. Harassment or bullying-...Do not make other people feel bad on purpose."

Carrotte et al. (2015) argued these general guidelines may not adequately identify harmful content, particularly because problematic health and fitness messages may be subtle, or tagged as "healthy." In essence, social media platforms subtly bypass their own recommendations by disseminating *Fitspiration* content that disregards National Eating Disorders Association guidelines. See NEDA, 2016.

Clearly, consuming and producing *Fitspiration*-type media has become a normative aspect of adolescent and young adult life. Disturbingly, however, even images and messages focused on flexibility and strength appear to elicit negative self-evaluation among female media consumers (Mulgrew & Hennes, 2014). Moreover, as media producers, one's pictures and posts related to food and exercise (although possibly edited or enhanced) ostensibly shape their personal brand (Vaterlaus, Patten, Rochec, & Young, 2015). It is therefore critical to "help young people develop critical and abstract thinking skills to consider carefully how they portray themselves in new media" (Daniels, 2016, p. 10) and to understand the nature, techniques, and impacts of media messages.

## Educational Implications

The preceding review well illustrates the complexity of social media in body image concerns; a relationship mediated by social comparison. The proliferation of health and fitness-related social media suggests, “its messages are unavoidable...and easily normalized regardless of actual health benefits” (Carrotte et al., 2015, p. 8).

Unattainable, digitally edited standards of beauty reinforced by images circulated by one’s peers makes it extremely challenging for young women to feel satisfied with their own physical appearance. However, because social media affords opportunity for users to generate content, educators *and* students can use this medium to extend social media literacy, counter social comparison, and create and advocate positive/inclusive images of health, each towards fulfilling *Fitspiration’s* purported purposes (promoting exercise and healthy eating).

This reinforces the need and importance of media literacy education; specifically, education that fosters wellness over appearance, and inspires informed, responsible, social media consumers and creators. “The available evidence suggests body image and media literacy intervention programs should address the potential impact of social media on its users” (Fardouly & Vartanian, 2016, p. 3). Holland and Tiggemann (2016) added, “...especially the pressures associated with the uploading and viewing of images” (p. 108).

To support uptake or maintenance of media literacy education, teachers must first understand it. Indeed, Cahil, Lester, Midford, Ramsden, and Venning (2014) found significant influences on educators’ pedagogical choices included understanding the educational rationale for an approach. Jeong, Cho, and Hwang (2012) provided such rationale in their meta-analysis of media literacy interventions, finding those most impactful can enhance both media-relevant and behavior-relevant outcomes.

Tiggemann and Zaccardo (2015) noted, “Media literacy programs which have shown some success in combating negative body image need to be expanded to incorporate social networking media in general, and *Fitspiration* imagery in particular” (p. 66). In fact, both men and women might usefully be educated about potential body dissatisfaction and effects from exposure to *Fitspiration* images (Tiggemann & Zaccardo, 2016). Education can help individuals recognize risks of social comparison in online and social media contexts (Lewallen & Behm-Morawitz, 2016). In particular, women should be warned against considering females portrayed in *Fitspiration* imagery as aspirational targets for social comparison (Adams, 2014).

Regardless of the particular platform, various factors in social media environments (i.e., featuring users themselves, ease of editing/enhancing images) may influence social comparison or self-enhancing tactics, including extreme dieting or exercise. Exploring such factors through media education may enhance students’ skills in effectively evaluating the credibility, quality, risks, and benefits of health information and *Fitspiration* imagery.

## Media Literacy Resources

A promising intervention, the *Get Real: Digital Media Literacy Toolkit* addresses potential influences (i.e., *Fitspiration*) on normalizing unrealistic body standards. Partnering with the NEDA, California State University students designed the toolkit, engaging university/high school students in testing their media literacy skills, discovering what their digital footprint reveals about their body image, and taking a stand against implausible, potentially harmful body portrayals. The toolkit also provides guidance for writing “social media shout-outs” to celebrities who oppose retouched photos of themselves. By using media literacy skills framed by media-relevant/behavior-relevant outcomes to advocate for change, the toolkit’s resources can “shift the spotlight from limited/artificial body ideals to more diverse and authentic body shapes and sizes that reinforce healthy lifestyles” (NEDA & California State University, n. d.).

*Key Concepts of Media Literacy* is another promising resource originating from MediaSmarts (2015), formally the Media Awareness Network. The Canadian not-for-profit organization designed this tool to encourage students to think critically and ethically, and reflect about their multimedia culture. With direct relevance to social comparison and body dissatisfaction, *Key Concepts* engages students as contributors to public debate about *Fitspiration*; deepens understanding of diversity, identity, and difference; explores connections between popular culture and attitudes, lifestyle choices and self-image; assists with critique of media representations so as to distinguish between reality and fantasy; and develops critical thinking, evaluation, and authentication skills. “Digital literacy enables individuals to understand how digital media content and applications can reflect, shape, enhance or manipulate our perceptions, beliefs and feelings” (p. 5).

MediaSmarts (2015) contended critical media consumers have a command of concepts necessary to examine media: Media are constructions; Audiences negotiate meaning through individual factors; Media have commercial implications—even in content not made for profit, distribution is generally facilitated by profit intentions; Media have social and political implications; and each medium has a unique aesthetic form.

Finally, Vogel’s (2015) *Positive Body Image Posting Guide* encourages *Fitspo* contributors to reflect *before* posting, posing questions such as, “Am I posting this message or photo? ...for my own gratification or to inspire, help and connect with my network?” (p. 1). The (U.S.) National Action Plan to Improve Health Literacy (2010), Healthy Campus 2020, and numerous Body Positive Campaigns are also impactful for young adults.

As social media evolves, educators must address it both as a place for fluid expression *and* as an environment with potential to perpetuate stereotypes, dangerous body ideals, and social comparison; a place where health and well-being trends such as *Fitspiration* are less likely to inspire, and more likely to mire.

Future research could draw on sociology of health or physical education literature. Case study investigation of behavior-related outcomes affected through a featured media literacy program may broaden understanding of how they function to buffer social comparisons inherent to *Fitspiration*.

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# “When my mom was incarcerated, I missed her.”

## Trauma’s Impact on Learning in Pre-K-12 Classrooms

Andie Cunningham

### Abstract

Trauma affects our classrooms frequently. Children who observe or experience trauma directly often demonstrate an altered learning process and shifting emotional needs. What guidance might inform K-12 instruction productively? This article frames the patterns discovered when a teacher researcher studied the teaching practices, strategies, and language of six educators who survived their own experiences of childhood sexual assault. With a keen awareness on strength and fragility, I detail the engaging, authentic, and community-centered methods from educators who turned their own experiences of trauma into effective ways to engage learners and build welcoming learning communities.

### Trauma’s Impact on Learning

We gather near the library door, preparing to return to our classroom. Jae’len struggles with the transition, and I ask if he can walk by himself or if he needs help. His verbal rant grows louder, and I gently hold his hand. Verbally loud and physically pulling away, he relentlessly holds my hand. With gentle energy, I lead us into our classroom and slowly shut our door.

I work with a small group on the carpet; Jae’len draws on the whiteboard beside me. After a few moments, he taps my shoulder and tells me how his picture shows “he anger.” I continue working with my group. A few minutes later he speaks again, telling me how I make him feel. His drawing shows a picture of me with a smile; he has changed his angry face to a smile. He moves closer, reminding me he did not do his “box” this morning. Much like a hope box, we use the small cardboard box to metaphorically hold his anxieties and anger each morning. I ask if we ought to do it now, and he says, “Yes.” Excusing myself from the small group, Jae’len and I walk over to my desk in silence, where he completes his much-needed-but-sometimes-not-completed morning ritual. I notice his energy change, and I asked him if my staying with him helped. He very quietly whispers, “Yes.”

Alongside the Common Core and district initiatives that drive classroom work, educators must find and use the most effective methods to ensure all students reach their highest potential and the desired goals. Jae’len taught me the most effective method for him was to be *with* him. If I waited with compassion even when he was furiously lashing out, he would almost always stay with us. Whether he was succeeding in writing his numbers or working through the challenges he experienced when writing words, Jae’len already knew what alone felt like. He needed human connection to take significant

academic and social risks in our classroom. He needed to be known and appreciated for who he was. He needed me to take the risk of being a genuine teacher every single moment.

On a field trip at a large forested park later in the year, angry Jae'len walked away from his group. Luckily, I had chosen to accompany the group, following my intuition of believing the trip might be difficult for him. Witnessing his escalation, I followed him, eventually catching up. I stood silently, looking at the surrounding forest and occasionally at him. I asked questions I genuinely did not know the answers to and listened intently to both his silence and verbal offerings. After about 20 minutes of conversation and silence, Jae'len walked over to me, slid his hand into mine and said, "Andie, I came on this field trip to be with you. I didn't want to come, but I wanted to be with you."

Jae'len: the boy who shouted his hatred of our classroom more times than I can count, the five-year-old who no longer received Christmas presents because presents stop at five in his family, the young man whose family includes more than 10 siblings, had done it again. While stating over and over that he wanted to leave, his voice communicated what he really wanted: to "be with" me.

When our students are emotionally taut and explosive, teaching and learning in the classroom can be difficult or impossible. Administrators sometimes prefer to remove disruptive children from the classroom, attempting to reduce disruptions. However, if Jae'len and students like him are not in the classroom, they can't sit in the Author's Chair to read their writing, they can't grapple with math problems, and they can't talk about the materials they are reading. If Jae'len wants to be here, then he will engage, learn, and grow. What does he need to stay in our classroom?

This article focuses on research I conducted with children and adults who have experienced trauma. While the larger research study is beyond the scope of this article, here I will describe the research literature that informs my work; then I will specifically focus on one of the critical findings. The voices of the many teachers and children who have bravely shared their stories and their classwork are woven throughout. Suggestions for working with survivors of trauma as well as potential future research will be explored.

## **Methodology**

In a major collaboration between the Center for Disease Control and Kaiser Permanente Medical Group, the ACE (Adverse Children's Experiences) Study identifies how the impact of experiences either with or from trauma in children's lives dramatically increases risk factors for adult-life difficulties (Felitti et al., 1998; Anda et al., 2006). In a 2012 National Council presentation, Anda and Felitti stated that adverse childhood experiences are both common and often ignored, and they reported that ACE's are a strong predictor of later-in-life health issues. Poverty, bullying, accidents, illness, immigration, family separation, and emotional, physical, and sexual abuse all are forms of trauma. Children who experience trauma may develop "toxic stress," or as defined by researchers at Harvard Medical School, "healthy development can be derailed by excessive or prolonged activation of stress response systems in the brain and body" (Center on the Developing Child, 2016).

Informed by neuroscience and psychology, trauma-informed teaching practices offer students who have survived or are experiencing trauma structures to combat the potentially debilitating effects of such negative experiences and develop positive brain and body growth. Creating supportive environments and relationships reduces damaging stress and increases healthy stress responses (Center on the Developing Child, 2016). My intent with this research is to document how teaching practices change and student support expands from the viewpoints and practices of educators who are survivors of childhood sex abuse themselves. In this article, I will refer to these educators as “survivor/educators.”

What strategies do survivor/educators use to effectively connect with, support, and engage students who have experienced trauma? Whether a student is experiencing the challenges of cancer or being beaten by a parent, we have choices about how we interact. We can continue to support their isolation by silencing our own fears and turning away from strugglers, leaving students alone and fear-centered. Alternatively, we invite them into authentically safe environments, encouraging them to speak, write, and learn in a supportive community.

Over the last 10 years, my teacher research has focused on how adults who experienced trauma themselves and who teach productively in the classroom. Specifically working with teachers who survived sexual assault and abuse through interviews, prompted writing, and storytelling, I identified patterns that highlight the power of positive student-teacher relationships, grounded theoretical frameworks, and effective teaching strategies for all students regardless of life experience. Each teacher in this research holds at least the following qualifications: engagement in the teaching profession, well respected by colleagues, and active teacher-researchers. One additional life experience sets us apart: we all experienced childhood sexual abuse. We six educators wear an empathetic lens in our lives, and we keenly understand trauma from the inside out. My research study documented our critical actions that effectively serve students who have experienced or are experiencing trauma and those who have not. The survivor/educators who informed this study are:

- \*Melissa: a Head Start preschool teacher
- \*Bree: a third-grade classroom teacher
- \*Ella: a third/fourth grade classroom teacher
- \*Indigo: a middle school classroom teacher
- \*Kate: a middle school and high school English teacher
- \*myself: a second- and fourth-grade literacy/math support teacher

## **Conditions of Learning**

In the research, a fundamental set of specific frames, internal mindsets, and teaching strategies emerged. I identify these practical roots as *Conditions of Learning*, critical actions we use while working with students, trauma survivors or not. Here is a list of the *Conditions of Learning*, articulating the students’ initial response to trauma and the desired educational change:

\*We **rebuild foundations**, leading students from isolation into community: the goal of this condition aids students to shift from isolated individuals in the midst of others into important community members;

\*We **set boundaries**, ensuring emotional and physical safety in the classroom to grow resilience: the goal here identifies healthy organizational and communication structures so students know clearly what to expect in our work together;

\*We **witness our students**, inviting self-value and preservation consistently: we actively see, hear, and learn directly from each student, making it clear that each person is important, no matter what;

\*We **lean in**, staying with students when their learning practices become unsettling: in this goal, we engage with students from their demonstrated needs, making sure our own discomfort or fear remains outside of the classroom. While we acknowledge students' emotional reactions within the classroom, we do not become them. We remain vigilant advocates for each child, and we ensure our own emotions and actions remain supportive; and

\*We **hold relentless faith**, supporting the transition from fear to hope and possibility: in this condition, our goal is to ensure all of us hold unfaltering belief and confidence in each student.

NeNe, Kenzi, Cristian, Gaby, Jae'len, and Gabe are just the first students I think of as I consider how trauma—poverty, abuse, hunger, violence, neglect, divorce—emerges in our classrooms. Our students bring an endless array of trauma histories into schools. Building foundations starts a new beginning but doesn't remove the original rocky foundations each child carries into our work. How do we build and rebuild foundations at the same time? How can we invite students to move healthily between silent isolation and community?

Using the critical details discovered within the *Conditions of Learning*, I noticed how we survivor/educators rebuild foundations, inviting students to healthily move between silent isolation and community to find safety in both. Specifically, these strategies emerged repeatedly: work from a place of genuine **presence**, carve generous moments of **time**, offer **gentleness**, **repeat** our words and intentions over and over again, bring **authenticity**, and **listen** deeply. Each action highlights the importance and depth necessary to rebuild foundations for survivors of trauma. This article details one of these Conditions, Rebuilding Foundations. The research also helped me create new definitions I will share.

### **Changing One Outcome of Trauma: Isolation**

Researchers have documented the damage of isolation for years. Jean Baker Miller and Irene Stiver, relational-cultural theorists from the Stone Center at Wellesley College, have eloquently captured the extreme effect of isolation. They write,

We believe that the most terrifying and destructive feeling that a person can experience is psychological isolation. This is not the same as being alone. It is a feeling that one is locked out

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of the possibility of human connection and of being powerless to change the situation....  
(Brown, 2012)

Kate, a sixth-grade educator, taught a selective-mute student who found comfort in the class collection of stuffed animals. He built fortresses with them, petting the stuffed animals and castling himself in. Soon after he created safety for himself in the classroom, he volunteered to write in the class science journal during a class science experiment. Triggered again when a local engineer mentored the class, the boy repeatedly snuck under desks. In time, he found ways to occasionally move out into the open with the rest of the students and Kate found that her support helped him grow as well. Reflecting later, Kate told me,

Those small things matter. I felt committed to pay attention to him and decided inside that I was going to walk with him, whether difficult or not, and help out when I can. I think those small things matter too as far as ‘I can trust you’ and ‘this is a safe place’ and ‘if I’m having trouble, you can help me solve a problem.’ It’s that availability piece. I tried to say in every way I could figure out, “you can be here, you can always be safe here, you can get help here when you need it.” That balance of isolation and community is very challenging; it is easier to put on a happy face and pretend nothing happened, nothing bad is there.

NeNe experienced ongoing trauma from seeing her mother sell and use drugs, solicit sex while in the home, and from frequent neglect. Her response in our classroom often included striking other children, screaming rages, and loud crying. Students didn’t know how to handle NeNe’s actions. Turning to inquiry to welcome her sadness, I grabbed chart paper, markers, and inner calm. On the top of the chart paper, I drew a human face with tears running down the cheeks. Below that, I drew from left to right a pair of human eyes, a human ear, and finally a hand and a heart. I separated these three drawings into columns large enough for writing. I invited my class to join me. Once my “friends” got settled, I asked what they saw when someone in our class had a face like in the left-hand picture. Pen ready to record their words exactly as they shared them, I heard: “Tears run down their face,” “Sad in the heart,” “They are crying.”

Then I pointed to the ear and asked what we might hear when someone cries. “We hear the crying.” “When someone is crying, it means they will stop and share.”

When I asked about the hand and heart symbol, only one student spoke. Luis shared, “I feel sad.”

And then NeNe, my young friend who rarely showed empathy, offered us her window through the trauma she experienced each day: “When someone yells at you, they cry. You can hear them.”

Inviting students to voice their own reactions together offered them new ground to work from. The chart hung in our class for months; students referred to it when moments of disequilibrium erupted, offering them options and confirmation of community. Little did I know that we were using mirror neurons.

## **Mirror Neurons**

Brain research identifies the literal disconnect between how we think and how we feel during traumatic experiences. Trauma forces the brain into the high alert of fight/flight/freeze, causing pathways to

concretize. The amygdala jams open during trauma, and unless we make changes through different neural pathways, it stays on, continuing unsafe emotions. This amygdala hijack occurs when the brain can't distinguish present moment from original trauma. Amazingly, the body has a way to battle this brain destruction. Dr. Dan Siegel's research explores and deepens our understanding of the powerful positive relationships on the brain. One detail of particular import is the mirror neuron. "Mirror neurons are the antennae that pick up information about the intentions and feelings of others" (Siegel, 2010, p. 224). When traumatized, the brain's pathways become rigid; when socially welcome occur, isolation diminishes, internal states engage with people nearby, and the brain physically and positively changes.

Mirror neurons play a primary role in shifting the brain from disconnection to connection through empathy, according to Siegel. To activate mirror neurons, humans must empathetically interact with another human being. This idea of a "shared state" (Siegel, 2007) seems to be something survivor/educators seek to create automatically in the classroom. This in turn fosters resiliency, encourages self-regulation, and positively alters brain growth. By directly teaching my students how to use mirror neurons to welcome someone deeply troubled, we found ways to stay with NeNe, and other students, even when we were scared.

## **Genuine Presence**

Based on my research, I define "presence" as being available to students without judgment or agenda. This often means offering more wait time and physically standing or sitting beside a student silently for a few moments longer than might be commonly used in classrooms. Shaniqua is one such student who taught me about genuine presence.

Shaniqua puzzled us deeply. By my side one moment and out the door the next, this kindergarten student ran away from our room almost every school day. Conversations with her mother simply confirmed that Shaniqua ran away from home too, climbing out of her second-story bedroom window frequently. Details I documented about her only partially filled in my confusion. She often smiled, used good manners, engaged happily with other students, and had a large group of friends. She was an expert of fish and wanted to become an expert of ballet. Whether one on one with me or side by side with other students, her comments often communicated a distinct lack of self-value. Once I heard her tell another student, "I wish I could live on the street." Shortly after I finished reading a book aloud to the class, Shaniqua told me quietly she wanted "to get a car run over" her. During a whole-class writing session, she told a table of students to "throw me in the garbage." One time she switched our actions and told me, "you ranned away."

Sometimes my behavior affected her. She disliked if I spoke loudly to her, and she sometimes ran away if I spoke with other children. She liked to climb the wall of windows in our classroom, and sometimes her escape path trailed right by me, allowing me the chance to wrap my arms around her tummy and hold her.

Most frequently Shaniqua sat next to me untying my shoes or sat with her body touching mine.

I recognized the other students as panicked and confused when Shaniqua ran away. They saw no one else running away from our classroom, and they directed their anger at Shaniqua and me for not stopping this activity. I had to help them relearn that I would not desert them emotionally or physically. Our job as teachers was to create a safe community in the midst of what felt incredibly unsafe. I knew that Shaniqua was doing the best she could, and our judgment and punishment would not serve her well at all. I had to find ways for us to be present with her.

We read and watched “Miss Twiggly’s Treehouse” (Warren, 2002), a Claymation video and book framing kindness and welcome in spite of resistance, and we made tree houses. I hosted a daily opening circle, passing stuffed animals around to help my students talk and share conflicting emotions like anger and empathy. The school social worker reminded me to use these helpful phrases such as, “This is a safe place,” and “This is our school.”

One day in spring, Shaiqua ran out of the school building. Police found her blocks away soon after, safe and running toward her home without breaking a sweat. Days after this sad event, her mother withdrew her without word or return. When we learned of her withdrawal, the students and I sat together and shared how we felt. Students talked about missing her. We celebrated and we said goodbye, sad to not see her again. We also held tight to our own community growth, bound by the fracturing of loss and the binding of presence. It was important for the children to know that even though certain students were no longer attending our school, they were still with us in memory, and their history affected all of us.

**Carve generous moments of time.** Trauma fractures survivors’ ability to trust, and healing from that destruction takes time. Survivors of trauma need to establish trust on their own terms and at their own pace. Based on my research, I define these generous amounts of time through the lens of educator: be available for the unpredictable openings in students’ and learning communities.

Kate’s reflection on her work with high school students shines light on the repeating need for time with any-age learners.

I was actually thinking back to the poetry that we have during the community building times because it’s that place where I can set the tone and it’s safe to say anything, to share anything. I can start to say “what is said in the room, stays in the room” part of the community, of partly saying we are a community where we hold each other’s stories. So that it’s not someone shares something that is painful or difficult and then that’s gonna go and get talk about in the hallway or discussed with other friends who mean well. When anything that happens in the classroom stays just there unless there is something that is dangerous. We set that up between students/teacher and among students that this is a place of safety....

...The dialogue journal is where I found out "my parent has cancer," where I found out...there is a young adult novel *Deadly Unna* that is still taught in Portland sometimes. And the father is abusive and an alcoholic also, and this young boy wrote, "As bad as Jackie's dad is, I bet he wasn't out drinking the night he was born the way my dad did. My dad left when I was a baby because he didn't love me. So there’s that chance for me—the teacher—to write back to him and say, "Nothing to do with you." As we respond to papers, as we listen to what students have written and they're the audience for each other, lots of things will come out then too.

When one fellow student spoke negatively about another student's dismissive feelings about her mother, Kate recalled,

...she just started yelling, "You have no idea what my mom is really like." She talked about being locked, this girl was locked in her room because her mom had men, and she said "my dad had to rescue me from how I was living. We didn't have enough food, it was awful." She was able to say in class in front of everybody. They all said, "I'm so sorry, I didn't know." They were there for her. I hope I was there for her too.

Melissa confirms the teacher's lens of presence within that necessary time expansion.

...making sure that there's space for those kids, even though you know they are not going to say anything, you just wait. Not letting other people say, "Well, she doesn't talk anyway so she doesn't need to be a part of this group"...making sure they're always included even if they're silent. They have to know that you know they're worth it...

As teachers negotiate time in the classroom, survivor/educators add a layer of awareness in preserving student connection and risk taking.

**Offer gentleness.** Traumatic stress can concretize brain pathways, reducing normal cognitive development. In a committed attempt to reduce fixed mindsets and foster academic growth, survivor/educators shift their energies from classrooms of demand to cultures of genuine welcome. Parker Palmer uses the idea of "presume welcome and extend welcome" as a focal point of effective relationship building in his groundbreaking book, "The Courage to Teach: The Inner Landscape of the Teacher" (Palmer, 2007). Similar to Parker's important articulation, I define offering gentleness as calm, present, and unassuming.

Bree, a third-grade classroom teacher told story after story of how one of her students repelled adults in the school where she taught. He pushed her away as well but her gentle, kind, calm actions kept him coming back to her. She intentionally formatted interactions with him where she remained silent in the midst of his silence, patiently waiting for his brain to move from rigidity to the beginning of fluidity.

...Sometimes he comes back from recess and he's totally shut down and he gets really upset. So recess can be a trigger. Sometimes things happen in the classroom. I know people say things to him or he just totally shuts down. So I am trying to figure out those triggers. I'm trying to notice that he gets really frustrated sometimes, he clinches his fist and he gets really frustrated and he's very inverted all of a sudden. I do some deep breathing with him, and then I walk away and let him his space, I think he needs his space. But when he is ready, he will come walk up to me and I know that he is ready to come back into the community...

Ella, also a third-grade teacher, chose to frame gentleness and welcome through an exercise in silence. Her lens altered how many listened within what can be a dangerous place for trauma survivors. Sitting in a class circle, she said, "I thought if we had something to focus on, we might be silent. Focus on listening to ourselves and watching the hermit crabs and being."

When quiet, Ella placed two large hermit crabs in the center of the circle. In the silence, the crabs emerged and started wandering. As the crabs came close to students on the outside of the circle, teacher

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Ella gently returned them to the center over and over; students giggled quietly in awe. Ella’s gentle voice chimed into the quiet, “I want you to know that that was 4.5 minutes of silence.”

The students all started talking, words spilling out into the room. Ella invited them to process what just happened.

“Chase, I can see you are with me. Jimmy, I saw you find that space with your body. So how did that feel?”

“Calm,” Kara said. Others agreed.

Diego, who struggles with communication issues, told the group, “Feels new.”

Anastasiia shared that she felt “water, kind of under the water.”

Trentin shared he “was walking with the hermit crabs.”

Vincent said, “It was great to hear no sound.”

Ella smiled and confirmed their work: “Because we were silent.”

Trusting silence in a community and becoming a community while being silent together were two points identified as important within the research; survivor/educators’ use of calm and genuineness to access silence allowed students to grow trust and community at the same time. Bree worked one on one with her student who struggled, offering him both welcome and physical space when he was most upset. Ella helped her students learn to be silent in a community and from a culture of welcome and calm as opposed to a more commonly used practice of silence through stress and expectation.

**Repeat our words and intentions over and over.** Whether students have experienced trauma or not, they need to trust what adults say and do. Within my research, it became apparent that educators must gently repeat the intention safety. In this story, Indigo reflects on her consistent use of emotional safety and how it threads through communities after students graduated from the school she teaches at:

...He was in my class for two years, he would be my classic story. Super hard times at home, divorce, nobody tracking anything, no self-confidence, total shut down. He didn't say a word for the first two months of my class. Then we did designs for the mural and he's an incredible artist and he did the design and everybody freaked out about how beautiful it was. And they were like we want to do that, you have to help draw. He started to get up and he opened up. He came back eighth grade year, and he wasn't as hooded and it was a slow thing, then basketball became comfortable, and now I see him in public, he's excited to see me, he'll talk to me. In seventh grade there was not a part of him that would have a conversation with an adult by choice...ever. It was no eye contact. I just let him be who he was and came up next to him. Oppositional kids or people who have been told down, they can't hear the boss, but they can hear the "Let's go somewhere together." And so he's one of those. I see the value in you, this is school, you have to jump through this hoop, I know it sucks. But this is what we are doing. I know you can climb that tree really well but we're not really supposed to climb trees right now. Instead of get down

right now. He is taking IB classes at high school. He could have gone so many directions. He could've just been not seen.

Indigo's gentle constant repeating welcome allowed this student to see his value in this community.

## **Authentic**

Authenticity remains crucial to survivors of trauma. Because of the violating experiences, many survivors are extremely hesitant to trust and highly doubtful of others. False engagement practices limit or destroy relational progress. I define "authenticity" here as true to self, true to others; in these relationships, fear no longer stops the survivor. Melissa's story from the classroom mirrors the need for deeply authentic interactions, especially in the midst of tension:

For the kids who I really worry about, I seek deeper relationships with them. That is how I try to help them. The ones I most worry about get more of my time and attention. And I do more of the foundation building with them because we are gonna need it when I need to say, "No, that is not okay" or "Put that down and sit right over here." When I have to be really directed for safety or someone else's safety, then that relationship is like a well filled and they can pull it and say, "She still loves me" or "I can do what she said, it's gonna be okay" without thinking about it, without thinking to fight me.

Kate, teaching high school students, reflects on how her students taught her to stay true to her practices:

I know I've created a safe space when they are able to tell the truth, and know they will be heard, and believed. Sometimes the truth is rage, like the girl who wrote a poem to her father, and said, in part, ..."I will never call you papa... I will never forgive you for leaving us. ...Do you thinking buying me a happy meal is going to make me happy?" She could be as mad as she wanted in my class without being judged for it. My evidence is their stories, and it's chilling, and inspiring. I've sat at my desk and cried as I've read their stories of a parent's cancer, of abandonment, of loneliness, of families divided. One young woman wrote, "I'm a war baby. I was born in the middle of a divorce." I'm proud of her strength to tell the truth. I'm in awe of teenagers' ability to be vulnerable, to share their truth, and find optimism and courage through the mess of things.

**Listen deeply.** Survivors of trauma need to be deeply listened to. Predetermined responses are often impetus for internal doubt and loss of trust. I define the ability to listen deeply as hearing what is genuinely said and withholding judgment. Ella's experience with a student who refused to talk offers one such example.

And finally one day I pass it to Stephanie and I sit as did the entire class. Today we are going to share I passed the apple to her. She sat and she sat and this was the longest sitting time I ever had, the longest wait time I have ever had: four minutes thirty two seconds, we sat in silence. And a few students at first tried to rescue her and then we sat and then I found myself trying to prompt her and I stopped. Then she said, clear as a whistle, I wish I had more words. but I can say that I am happy. And she passed the apple as fast as she could. And I said thank you and the

whole class was just silent. She had been in our class two months and not spoken. So the next week at community circle, I pass the apple to Stephanie and said we are going to use our voice today. And we waited a long time. But because we have a lot of ELL kids, it is not like a huge thing. You know and she shared maybe four words, just real...I think she said I like writing and she passed the apple. Thank you, Stephanie....and I think that is so vital to finding your voice and finding who you are and you can't be wrong. You can't be wrong because there isn't a wrong in finding who you are. (Ella, 2010)

### Positive Outcomes: So What?

My class and I read Jacqueline Woodson’s powerful story “Visiting Day” (2002) together. Woodson’s picture book details the story of a young girl and her grandmother preparing to visit the girl’s father in prison for the first time, and my students received the story from a variety of life experiences. Kelli recognized her fractured family living within the book as we read.

It was not clear how impaired her mental capacity was due to the abuse and violence she had experienced. She struggled to write her own name, and her explanations of her work confused me. Once successful at communicating her understandings, she became a class leader. She realized the importance of her voice within our academic community. Her classmates respected her offerings. Kelli’s response to our reading “Visiting Day” offered a clear window into her life experience. In her drawing of what the book meant to her, she drew a person with tears on their face and dots above in the center of the page. Then she drew a frowning person with hair followed by her stick figure with two feet, no arms, a head, two eyes, a partial mouth, and a cap. On the side she wrote, “Dad,” “KD,” “Mam” and read her writing to me: Dad, Kid, Mom. She then told me, “My mom and a friend got in a fight and my mom went to jail. When my mom was incarcerated, I missed her.”

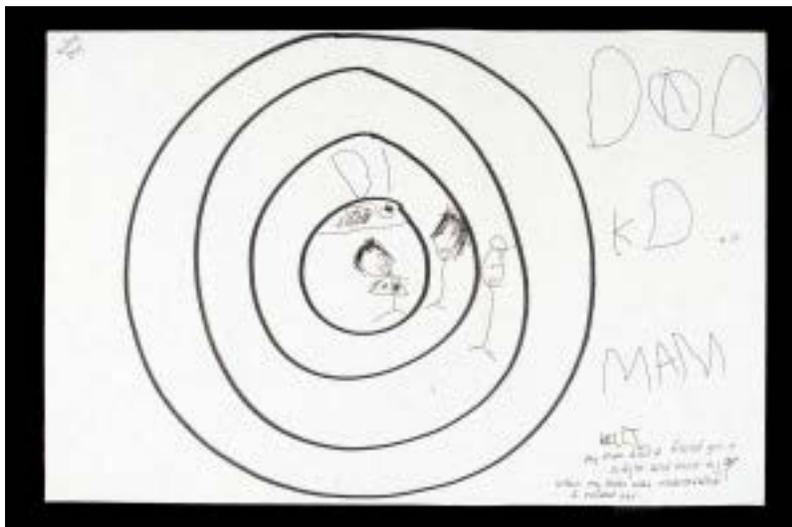


Fig. 1: Kelli’s response to reading the book “Visiting Day”

This was the first time that Kelli shared with me her knowledge of incarceration. Nine months after our work began and a five-year-old's lifetime of homelessness, child abuse, parental drug abuse, and gun violence, Kelli's brain finally communicated her desired message and grade-level growth. She also trusted herself more to speak her own truth.

## Conclusion

My research is in its infancy. These examples begin to point to how foundations must be built and rebuilt with students who are survivors of trauma. Time, intention, genuineness, and so much more are critical energies and actions that invite and welcome establishing relational trust. Students need us to show up fully to craft learning invitations that detail and enact these practices every day. We have the capacity to create classrooms for survivors of trauma, and we need to expand what we know about how people learn after experiencing trauma. As we transition into creating learning spaces where teachers can honestly reflect on their own responses to the actions in their classrooms and explore how they can contribute their wisdom of trauma and life, we will positively enhance the productivity of our students. By thoughtfully crafting classroom practices that center on healing the debilitating impact of trauma, we can alter its long-term effects, enhance student success, and positively support lifelong learners.

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# Doctoral Peer Writing Groups as a Means of Promoting Well-Being

Sara Doody, Maggie McDonnell, Erin Reid, and Sarah C. Marshall

## Abstract

This collaborative autoethnography explores how a doctoral peer writing group (PWG) has become an important means of fostering well-being among the authors, who are four doctoral scholars. Focusing on how writing in doctoral education can act as a barrier to well-being, defined as feeling part of a *community*, feeling *balanced*, and feeling *motivated* by forward momentum, each author shares her particular experiences with writing and how the PWG has contributed to her well-being. Based on the authors' narratives, the article also suggests how PWGs may be useful in promoting well-being across several levels of education.

## Doctoral Peer Writing Groups as a Means of Promoting Well-Being

Mental health and overall well-being are becoming key factors for university student success, with healthy campus initiatives on the rise in universities and colleges across Canada (Okanagan Charter, 2015). With full-time doctoral enrollment in Canada increasing 13 percent from 2009 to 2013 (Looker, 2016), success in doctoral education is a particularly timely topic. A 2013 report from McGill's Counselling and Mental Health Services highlighted concerns about graduate student mental health and well-being, especially in regard to the rising population of graduate students generally and doctoral scholars<sup>1</sup> specifically. Recommendations from this report include improvements of mental health support services to address problems in the domains of mental health and well-being (Di Genova & Romano, 2014). Increasingly, doctoral well-being is affected by growing institutional demands and expectations, such as the pressure to quickly complete studies or to publish (Elgar, 2003). Moreover, Castro, Garcia, Cavazos, and Castro (2011) point out how a lack of support or mentorship from doctoral supervisors contributes to doctoral stress and may be an important factor in individuals abandoning their doctoral studies. All these variables play a role in the rates of doctoral attrition, with an estimated 30 to 50 percent of doctoral scholars not completing their studies (e.g., McAlpine & Norton, 2006). Even of those doctoral scholars that complete their degrees, many report the experience of doctoral studies as being "overwhelming" or "very difficult" (Haynes et al., 2012), with stress and social isolation frequently cited as two key areas of struggle in terms of well-being.

There may be several factors that influence the well-being of doctoral scholars, such as financial strain or geographical distance from loved ones, but one institutional factor that commonly negatively affects the well-being of the doctoral scholar is the actual act and process of writing (e.g., Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Writing is of central importance to doctoral studies, yet it remains a frequent cause of stress (Aitchison & Lee, 2006; Paré, 2011), which contributes to doctoral scholars feeling isolated and unwell.

The aim of this paper is to explore and discuss how a peer writing group (PWG) in the context of doctoral education acts as a unique means of fostering well-being among the authors, who are four doctoral scholars. Although we're all researching different things—Sarah M. is looking at teacher education in physical therapy, Sara D. is writing about doctoral writing, Erin is exploring how religious literacy can be beneficial in adult language learning, and Maggie is looking at development of teacher identity in higher education—we've been writing together for over a year now. When Sara began looking into writing groups, she found a great deal written from the perspective of those who encourage us to form groups, but only one paper written from the perspective of an actual group member (Maher et al., 2008). We were inspired to write and share, in hope that others might benefit from this strategy.

## Well-Being

A growing body of research investigates the relationship between well-being and doctoral scholars (Castro et al., 2011; Haynes et. al, 2012; Lovitts, 2001). Stakeholders include institutional policy-makers seeking to maximize institutional efficiency (Elgar, 2003), mental health practitioners concerned with the rising numbers of doctoral scholars among their clients (Di Genova & Romano, 2014), and doctoral scholars themselves (Nelson, 2014). The motivations of these different stakeholders may be diverse; nevertheless, these factors underlie the burgeoning interest in the well-being of doctoral scholars.

Although the term “well-being” is used frequently in public discourse, governmental and institutional policies, and scholarly research, there remains a wide variety of applications to its usage (Hird, 2003). Within philosophical discussions of the term, well-being is often understood as “a life filled with wholehearted and successful engagement in worthwhile relationships and activities” (White, 2011, p. 11). While there is no single commonly accepted definition of well-being, reference to well-being, across disciplines, demonstrates that the term encompasses not simply an absence of illness, but rather a state of something akin to happiness or satisfaction with one's life or situation (Felce & Perry, 1995). For the purposes of this paper, we frame our discussion drawing on Felce and Perry, who state that well-being “comprises objective descriptors and subjective evaluations of physical, material, social and emotional wellbeing [*sic*], together with the extent of personal development and purposeful activity, all weighted by a set of values” (p. 60). In other words, although it is necessary that one feel satisfied with external criteria of one's life, to truly experience well-being this must be combined with a sense of purpose and meaning in one's life.

Drawing on the above conceptualizations of well-being, we sketched our own personal understanding of what this means to us within the doctoral context (see Figure 1). As reflected in our mind-map, we felt that well-being is multi-faceted, and certain aspects of it are naturally unique to one's particular situation. A feeling of isolation is a common complaint among graduate students, and one that each of us has struggled with in our own academic journeys. For us, a significant aspect of our well-being was feeling *part of a community*. We also felt that *balance* between our physical, social, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual selves was a crucial ingredient to our well-being. For all four of us, the many facets of doctoral studies itself can become all-consuming, leading us to neglect certain parts of ourselves, whether they be spiritual, emotional, physical, or social. Three of us are mature returners, with ongoing commitments

to careers, partners, and children; the addition of our scholarly work to that mix at times makes the task of finding balance feel like a precarious juggling act. Finally, as a group of four doctoral scholars, we agreed that well-being includes the feeling of *motivation*, and moving forward, making progress in our academic project; something that is a worthwhile endeavour to each of us.

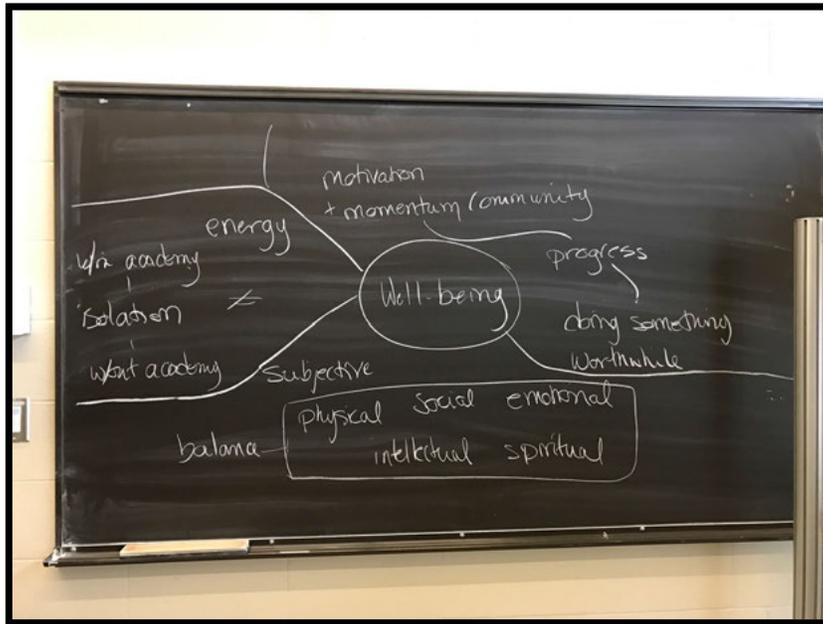


Fig. 1: Mapping our conceptualization of "well-being"

### Assumptions About Writing

As we have mentioned, the act and process of writing can have a negative influence on well-being in doctoral study. Not only is writing commonly perceived as occurring in isolation, it can also feel like a roadblock that prevents us from moving forward, and thus contributes to disrupting balance in our lives. In order to begin to explore our own relationship with writing and well-being, we first needed to probe the idea of what writing is to us, given that there are diverse ways to conceptualize the act and process of writing. A great deal of the stress and frustration so commonly associated with writing stems, we believe, from two pervasive assumptions about what writing is.

One dominant assumption of writing assumes that it exists as a set of skills that can be easily learned and taught; a belief that positions those who are unable to write “well” as skill-deficient (e.g., Aitchison & Lee, 2006). This orientation towards writing tends to propagate the idea that the “problem” of writing is individualized within the writer herself (Aitchison, Catterall, Ross, & Burgin, 2012). That is, skill-centered discourses about writing position doctoral scholars as having already learned how to write well, or as being in need of outside assistance (e.g., from writing centers or remedial writing classes). Writing at the doctoral level can become so intimidating for doctoral scholars that they may fear sending their writing

to their supervisors for feedback and become discouraged and dejected when they see reviews of their work that essentially instruct them to change everything (Starke-Meyerring, 2011).

A second common assumption about writing is that it must be done in isolation. The act and process of writing itself is largely hidden and even marginalized in graduate education, meaning that writing is often perceived as starting *after* the real intellectual work has been finished (i.e., after the research has been done), instead of being viewed as a part of the intellectual work itself. Writing remains on the margins of doctoral work and the status quo assumption that writers require isolation and solitude to simply "write-up" their thoughts continues to be internalized by doctoral writers (Kamler & Thomson, 2014; Starke-Meyerring, 2014). While universities express concern over doctoral writing, further discussions about this concern remain largely neglected (Paré, 2011). It is in part because of these assumptions (that writing is a set of skills performed individually in isolation), doctoral scholars often end up feeling like writing is something that they cannot do, which can have a profound effect on their sense of well-being.

Guided by the thinking of rhetorical genre scholars, we situate our PWG within a markedly different view of writing. For us, writing is not so much a skill as it is a form of situated and social practice. That is, we view the specific kinds of writing that we must produce as typified responses to recognizable and recurrent social situations, or as *genres* (Miller, 1984/1994; Schryer 1993). Genres are fairly stable kinds of discourse that are produced within particular communities and perform specific kinds of regularized social actions, while also (re)producing the community itself (Freedman & Medway, 1994). From a genre perspective, writing is not simply a skill that can be easily acquired, but is the embodiment of a precise set of social practices and beliefs that are passed down and reproduced by members of a specific group. The situated and historical nature of genre means that its conventions, or features, that make a particular example of a genre recognizable and acceptable, are often perceived as common sense to experts, yet to learners, these conventions can be shrouded in mystery (Paré, 2002). The "hidden nature" of genre is particularly important when exploring how writing comes to be associated with issues of well-being, because established members of academic communities often believe that what constitutes "good" writing is obvious (Starke-Meyerring, Paré, Sun, & El-Bezre, 2014). The inability to recognize and produce the genres of a particular community often leaves doctoral scholars feeling as though they cannot write and that they are imposters in academia. Again, this has a powerful impact on all three of the facets of well-being discussed above, with doctoral scholars struggling to learn tacit genre conventions on their own, causing them to lose the balance in their lives, and to lose motivation, feeling as though they have ceased to move forward in their academic journey (e.g., Starke-Meyerring, 2011).

### **Collaborative Autoethnography**

In the fall of our second year in our doctoral program, we led a discussion with our graduate colleagues on how our PWG was helping us to overcome the struggles of academic life. This paper grew out of that discussion. In retrospect, it seems inevitable that we would want to write together; that is, not just side by side, but on a single, heteroglossic text, our four voices each represented separately and yet together, as a collaborative autoethnography.

The term *autoethnography* may imply a solo researcher, but often researchers work together in collaborative autoethnography, defined as “a qualitative research method in which researchers work in community to collect their autobiographical materials and to analyze and interpret their data collectively” (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 23). Collaborative autoethnography typically begins with “group sharing [and] probing” (p. 23) and subsequent stages of data analysis involve group interpretation, with the final product being an exercise in group writing. Chang and colleagues argue that collaborative autoethnography allows researchers to engage in self-reflection and collective analysis simultaneously. This variation on the concept of autoethnography lends credibility to the research, since the group is involved in a collective exploration; furthermore, collaborative autoethnography offers researchers an even deeper understanding of the self and others, and begins building community from within the research cycle itself (p. 25).

Rather than community arising from the process, for us, the process seems to have arisen from the community. Thus, arguably, Chang et al.’s (2013) unidirectional depiction of the collaborative autoethnographic process can be expanded to include experiences like ours: groups who have been working side by side, becoming a community, recognizing the collective and individual rewards of this group dynamic, and then reflecting on the experience itself. Reflecting on our process revealed to us just how important the PWG has become in terms of our well-being, especially in terms of our writing as doctoral scholars.

## PWG, Writing, and Well-Being

Based on our assumptions of well-being and writing discussed above and using a collaborative autoethnography approach, below we reflect on how our PWG has provided a unique space to foster well-being in the doctoral context through its collaborative nature, the balance it provides to our lives, and through group motivation.

### Our Peer Writing Group

The PWG that we are involved in was created as a consequence of the four of us bemoaning how hard it was to actually sit down and *write* during the first year of our doctoral journey. We were fortunate to have a doctoral seminar leader in our first year together who almost casually mentioned getting together to write, and a mutual gap in our schedules that made it easy and natural to do so. The group began when one of us sent out a fairly informal invitation to write, which was emailed to a larger cohort of 17 students, and has evolved into a very important part of our doctoral process. At the outset, a common complaint amongst the four of us was that we felt stalled in our work; we had lost our momentum, we couldn’t write, we weren’t getting where we wanted, and we were frustrated and irritated by this. We decided we would meet once every two weeks to write, and in the intervals between, share our frustrations about what we were doing. Therefore, initially, the group was organized in a “shut-up-and-write” (SUAW) format in order to help us feel as though we were getting writing done. Typically, we use

the Pomodoro method, so in our two-hour sessions, we write in 25-minute sessions, taking a short break to chat, or share bits of our writing.

In the beginning of the second year of our doctoral journey, the initial SUAW format evolved into review sessions alternating with writing sessions. This seemed a natural progression for a few reasons. We started the PWG as virtual strangers, so the initial SUAW sessions were low-risk for us all. However, as we began getting to know each other better over the summer between first and second year, we started meeting weekly, sometimes to write, but increasingly to review. Our group now tries to meet once a week—many groups meet less frequently, but we're using the weekly appointment as a way of keeping ourselves connected to the habit of public writing. Last fall, as we all worked on grant applications and candidacy papers, we decided to dedicate one session each month to a share-and-respond session, wherein we exchange computers and comment in writing on each other's work. We discuss our comments before we end the session, and we each leave with at least two other people's feedback recorded in our text, for reflection and reference.

In our feedback, we aim to ask questions that encourage the writer to think critically about what she is writing and why, not to criticize structure and ideas. While the members of our group have different backgrounds and experiences with writing and writing groups, and are working on different research topics, all of us have come to look forward to our weekly meetings for the support and motivation they provide, in both our academic careers and even in our personal lives.

Our main goal is to illustrate how participating in a doctoral PWG has been an integral part of maintaining our well-being as doctoral scholars. We have chosen to present individual commentaries about how each of our specific experiences speaks to fostering well-being according to our three-part definition introduced above. In addition, following the example of groups like Maher and colleagues (2008), we provide a collective commentary on how all of the individual narratives speak to the larger issue of doctoral well-being in relation to writing.

## **Collaboration**

[Erin] It took me a long time to understand how collaboration could lead to well-being in my graduate studies. I think I was, perhaps like many, resistant to the idea that writing and research could be done collaboratively. Throughout most of my university education, I was under the impression that good writing could only come out of some kind of solitary, hermit-like process. I was also somehow convinced that this solitary writing must be accompanied by intense personal stress—it certainly seemed to be intensely stressful for my fellow students. Like so many of my peers, I struggled to see myself as a legitimate writer/scholar, frequently suffering from what I would eventually name as CSD (crippling self-doubt). This CSD might be mentioned in passing as a self-deprecating joke, but I took it as a natural, though unfortunately painful, part of the writing process. Looking back on my earlier university experiences with writing, I can't help but wish I had been more aware of the immeasurable benefits in sharing one's work with a writing group, and the fruitfulness of collaborative writing.

[Sarah] When I first started this PhD journey, I felt like a fish out of water. Having spent more than half my life in science and quantitative settings, to be immersed in the social sciences was a big change, to say the least. One of my classmates coined CSD, but I knew that feeling as the “Imposter Syndrome,” that is to say I felt that soon, maybe very soon, someone would find out that I was simply an imposter and really didn’t know what I was doing, what I was writing about or really, what was going on at all. When the idea of writing in a group surfaced, I thought, “That’s crazy! How can you write with people around?” And then I tried writing on my own. So many words that just would not come. When we started our SUAW sessions, I saw the light and realized the value of recognizing the commonalities of our disparate situations: all four of us were trying to produce thoughts, ideas, reflections and text, and for me the best way to do that is not in fact alone in a hermit’s shack, but right beside someone else who also was madly typing away.

[Maggie] It took me a while to start my doctoral journey. I already had two Masters degrees, and a permanent teaching position in a college system that guarantees my employment and pension. In fact, rather than get back into academia, I enrolled in fitness instructor courses, and became a certified yoga instructor. While the lure of academia was there, I was also a little gun-shy after the isolating experience of my second Masters. When I did find my way to our program, it felt like this PWG was exactly what I needed—even once our course work was done, we would have our commitment to each other to continue, as a community of scholars. As Sarah said, my initial reaction to actually writing side by side was skeptical, and the idea of writing collaboratively was frankly inconceivable. But the idea of maintaining contact, and of exchanging feedback, got me over those uncertainties.

[Sara] The initial “shut-up-and-write” sessions were useful for getting us to write, but were perhaps more important for what happened between the writing. The most useful parts of our meetings, for me, were really the interactions between writing intervals. I think one of the most important things that developed from this was that we built a community through collaborating with each other, listening to what everyone was working on, getting a sense of how they thought, but also getting a sense of my own thinking when I had to explain my work. The overtly social nature of the group was huge, especially because prior to this, I felt really detached from any kind of collegial community. This really helped me feel less lonely and isolated as a doctoral scholar.

**Group commentary.** A common thread throughout our individual reflections is how writing alongside others has become a particularly important way of maintaining our well-being during the doctoral writing process. As we have pointed out, writing in doctoral contexts is often done alone, both in a literal and figurative sense (Kamler & Thomson, 2014). Most of us have had these experiences in the past, where writing meant being isolated and locked away from the world in a physical sense, but also in the sense that we really didn’t have anyone to write *for*. Without the understanding of writing as social, as being directed towards a larger community of our colleagues, the feelings of isolation we experienced only increased. Working in this writing group, however, has made this social nature of writing more visible through the kinds of collaboration we have undertaken. As Sara and Maggie point out, sharing the difficulties we were facing with our writing and getting suggestions from our colleagues enabled us to begin seeing writing as much more collaborative and social.

## Balance

[Erin] Being a doctoral PWG member has allowed me to renegotiate my relationship with the writing process and to highlight the importance of balance in graduate studies. The struggle I experienced with writing in my undergraduate studies intensified dramatically when I found myself in graduate school as a Master's student in religious studies where the long-standing trope of the solitary, struggling, and hopefully brilliant writer was in full force. Though graduate students shared a large office, so inevitably ended up occasionally writing at the same time, our *writing* was never shared, only our anxieties and self-doubts. Moreover, there seemed to me to be a direct correlation between the most stressed out student and the most brilliant—writing the bulk of my master's thesis in three painful weeks was something of a badge of honour for me. However, this writing experience was so intensely horrible that it literally led to me being unable to move my head for weeks and it took me over a year of physiotherapy sessions to heal its physical effects. This extreme experience points to a complete lack of balance in my life at the time: I was consumed with writing and made no attempt to nurture any other part of myself, be it physical, social, or spiritual.

[Sarah] Hearing the trials and tribulations of the other members of this PWG has helped normalize my own feelings and experiences. I find it easier to sit down and write when it is time to write, and stop and go for a walk or a swim when it is time for that. We support each other in our various stages of the journey, and we don't judge what or when or why. Three of my departmental colleagues have begun their graduate degrees recently and I've mentioned the PWG and some of the lessons I've learned and continue to learn, to them. It's almost like the balance I'm getting from the PWG has a ripple effect and is affecting others in our inner and outer circles.

**Group commentary.** The PWG has shown each of us that we are not alone in struggling to find balance in the doctoral process. As Erin and Sarah point out, writing in graduate studies has the potential to become all-consuming and can lead to burn-out and other physical health issues. The fear of reliving past writing traumas was one impetus for continuing to meet after our first session together. Forming the writing group allowed us to create a social space for our writing and has become like a life preserver, preventing us from drowning in our individual writing. In addition, the social nature of the writing has allowed us to engage in one of Felce and Perry's (1995) components of well-being that we drew on; namely, personal development alongside others. This personal development is an important factor in maintaining balance in our lives. This balance, in which we are neither completely consumed by our doctoral work, nor completely distracted from it, allows us to maintain our momentum.

## Motivation and Momentum

[Maggie] I think for me, the forward momentum is the most important facet of the PWG. When I was working on my MEd, I found myself discouraged to the point of quitting because one college with which I was working delayed my process so much that by the time I finally got their green light, I had lost my steam. One of the fears I had about embarking on the doctoral journey was that I would get to the research and writing leg and just quit. The PWG, through our regular meetings and supportive community, gives

me that sense of moving forward, and personally, a sense that I am accountable. Someone will notice if I stop, and, knowing this group, they'll throw me a towrope.

[Sara] I also think that an important part of this group has been how motivating it is: it makes me get things done. After review sessions and hearing what people think about my writing and asking me questions about what I am doing, I feel really motivated to get to work. Working with a PWG and talking through the written work always ends up with both really actionable feedback (how do you define this?) as well as new ideas that are built in the discussion through questions (is this what you mean? or this is your main point and this is how things are supposed to hang together, right?).

[Sarah] The deadline of biweekly and then weekly meetings to write and share our writing has been of tremendous help to me. I am fairly organized, and in general work to deadlines, but at the start of the first semester of my PhD, trying to "fit in some writing" was useless. I got very little done on my own, because writing is difficult, especially perhaps for me coming from a science background. I especially loved it when we shared our writing; I got to see how the others in the PWG expressed themselves, how they framed their arguments and supported their conclusions. The experience also helped get me used to seeing writing that was more expansive and eloquent than what I had seen in typical science journals.

[Erin] Sharing my writing with my peers has been a real revelation to me and an incredible motivating force. As I've previously mentioned, I have spent large amounts of time during my academic studies immersed in self-doubt and very reluctant to share my work with anyone. This has been a problem for me my whole life, and I recognize that my self-doubt has often held me back. As I began to share my work, I developed skills in critical reading, editing, and giving and receiving feedback, which in turn have led to a growing sense of confidence in my academic self. Supported by the weekly meetings with my peers in the writing group, this emerging confidence in turn motivates me to continue on my doctoral journey.

**Group commentary.** One common thread weaving throughout our discussion on how the writing group contributes to our well-being through motivation is the support system this group has developed. As discussed above, one of the barriers to doctoral well-being is a lack of community and peer support through the doctoral process. Our PWG allows us to experience ourselves as members of a writing group. This in turn facilitates identifying ourselves as part of a larger peer community and scholarly community (Maher et al., 2008). We still experience the pressures and realities of doctoral studies, but through our supportive weekly PWG meetings, we have developed an increased ability to situate ourselves as researchers and as legitimate academic writers who are actively navigating the PhD journey, keeping well in mind, body, and spirit.

## Reflecting on the Process

As described above, we see our well-being as doctoral scholars as comprising community, balance, motivation, and momentum. In our individual commentaries, we have shared how the PWG has become an integral and essential facet of our individual and collective well-being as doctoral scholars. Perhaps most importantly, writing, for us, now isn't something to be intimidated by. We have recognized and rejected the dominant assumptions surrounding academic writing; we work with writing so much that we have developed a way of talking about it together, which has created a unique space that fosters community, collaboration, balance, motivation, and momentum. This community space, as Sara discusses above, supports our practice as writers. Viewing writing as a situated practice has been particularly helpful in the peer review process, which has taught us to seek out and address constructive feedback on our work. The support we receive through our PWG develops our feelings of confidence in various genres of academic writing. As Sarah pointed out in her discussion of "imposter syndrome," the PWG experience also gives us a greater sense of our legitimacy as doctoral scholars. We have felt that situating our PWG within a rhetorical perspective helps us to renegotiate how we experience writing, because instead of struggling in isolation as Erin did, we are working and writing together. We are not in danger of losing balance in our lives; or stagnating in our process, like Maggie did, because we have each other to keep us afloat.

There are myriad resources, online and on some campuses, to help scholars and students set up writing groups. We suggest that departments would be wise to recognize the struggles of student writers, and to more actively encourage PWGs, particularly among graduate and doctoral scholars. We feel strongly that other doctoral scholars can benefit from PWGs. In fact, we would argue that our experience demonstrates how PWGs are an effective pedagogical tool, as well as a space that fosters well-being.

### Note

1. While individuals pursuing a doctorate may have specific titles based on their progression in their program (i.e., doctoral student, doctoral candidate), here we use the term "doctoral scholars" to refer to all members of the doctoral population.

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# Fostering Well-Being in Education Through Yoga and Mindfulness in the Snow (*Snowga*)

Leanne Glasser

## Abstract

Through a program called *Snowga* (yoga in the snow), students learned about mindfulness and living in the present moment through yoga postures and meditations. Positive changes included growth in well-being as the children explored self, community, and the natural world through yoga, mindfulness, personal reflective journals, and artwork. The purpose: to engender awareness of the efficacy of mindfulness and yoga practices in nature and contribute to the growing body of knowledge around well-being in education.

## Background

I have always been an advocate for getting students outside, experiencing nature, and playing. My own education had a heavy literature focus throughout my childhood and into my undergraduate years. However, I always felt drawn to the natural world. I loved being outside whether it was hiking or running on a trail, or enjoying a book under a tree in my backyard. After teaching abroad in South Korea for three years, I noticed that my students did not have the same opportunities to connect with the natural world that I had growing up. When I returned to my hometown for my master's degree program, I was fortunate enough to experience my first ever outdoor education course—on my first day of class no less. As the small class walked through the trails behind the school, the autumn leaves just changing colour, a quotation that I had not thought of in years danced through my mind. I loved literature and, in particular, loved *Anne of Green Gables* by L. M. Montgomery (1915):

It was November--the month of crimson sunsets, parting birds, deep, sad hymns of the sea, passionate wind-songs in the pines. Anne roamed through the pineland alleys in the park and, as she said, let that great sweeping wind blow the fog out of her soul. (p. 161)

It may not have been November at the time, but the bright colours, the cool breeze, and being in nature took me back to my childhood of imagining that I was *Anne of Green Gables*, curious, talkative, and in love with her surroundings. This connection to my childhood memories filled my heart with warm fuzzy feelings and I realized through this course that I was onto something very special. I learned to ask questions, to be curious, and to bring out the Anne Shirley that was within me. This deep love and connection with the beauty of all things around me made me realize that my passion, my calling, was to help students also find this sense of overall well-being. I decided to explore these ideas further in my thesis research as a way of helping students foster their own well-being in education.

Through many of my readings—Mitchell Thomashow (1995) in particular—I realized that the connection and love that I felt could be defined as an “ecological connection” with the natural world. I discovered that so many before me felt these connections and this drive to do something with their understanding. For me, my passions are in education with elementary grades and with helping students to discover these inner connections to an outer world, as a way of promoting well-being. Thomashow (1995) wrote, “ecological literacy conveys an attitude, ‘driven by the sense of wonder, the sheer delight in being alive in a mysterious, beautiful world’” (p. 175). The concept of the world being “mysterious” and “beautiful” perfectly sums up my feelings and curiosity about the natural world. I wondered if there was some way that I could help others develop their curiosity about the natural world to foster their own well-being.

## Goals and Objectives

My aim was to help students build an understanding of the natural world (through yoga movement, mindfulness, artwork, and meditation while enjoying, discovering, and being in the outdoors) as ways of discovering and nurturing well-being. I believe well-being and holistic education are interrelated. Holistic education is based on three basic principles: balance, inclusion, and connection (Miller, 2007). Through my research I found mindfulness, in a group setting, in the natural world, to be one means of achieving balance, inclusion, and connection (a sense of well-being). While mindfulness opens the possibility of finding connection (Rechtschaffen, 2014), the connection is incomplete if no link is made with the natural world; mindfulness can be a way of forming deeper connections while simultaneously situating the self as one with nature, rather than separate from nature (Fletcher, 2016). “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994, p. 4). An example of a mindfulness exercise I used with my students was:

*Find a comfortable seated posture. When you feel comfortable, close your eyes. Bring your attention into your breath. Notice how the breath feels. Notice that you are breathing in. Notice that you are breathing out. You don't need to change your breathing. Just notice it. Hear your breath. Feel your breath. Notice what it feels like. Now bring your attention to your heart. Feel your heart. Maybe you can feel it beating. Maybe you just know that it is beating. Try to give the feeling in your heart a name or a word that has meaning for you today. Notice what it feels like.*

My well-being has changed for the better by being outside and taking time to identify with nature through mindfulness and movement. In reading the literature around student well-being, I came across Sauv e’s (2009) framework. I wondered if I could observe well-being through a connection to the natural world by implementing adaptations to Sauv e’s framework that included mindfulness and yoga practices in the outdoors. I hoped that I would observe positive changes in the students’ well-being as they moved through the four levels of being. My conceptual framework centered well-being as the first level and central priority, followed by yoga and mindfulness practice as a way of executing self-care and wellness. The third level extended to connections from the self out into community and to place. The final level moved from community and place, to discussions about exploring and appreciating the natural world. Below I describe each of the four levels of the conceptual framework in detail, particularly how they interconnect with one another and how they helped me observe the positive changes in the students’ overall well-being as part of the research project.

## Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework used to structure or frame this research is an expanded version of a framework developed by Sauv  (2009). In her framework, she discusses three interrelated spheres of personal and social development: The Self; Other Humans; and the Environment (see Figure 1). Sauv  defines the meaning of environment within the spheres: "here the environment is certainly not just a context, scenery or set of manageable 'resources'. It consists of all levels of being and manifestation" (p. 330). Bringing the environment into all spheres is important, but a focus also needed to be placed on self. As a result, I placed "self" at the centre of my framework, within its core, and labelled it "emotional well-being of the students."

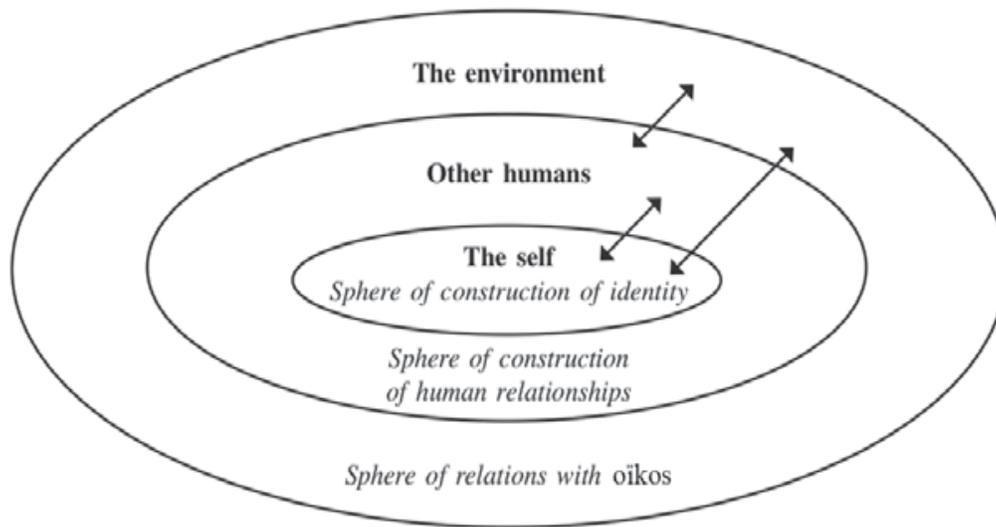


Fig. 1: Sauv 's (2009) three interrelated spheres of personal and social development (p. 330)

The second sphere focuses on the importance of human relationships with other humans. However, here too I suggested a revision to the model by including elements of mindfulness and yoga that can extend into the more-than-human community, rather than being limited to only other humans.

The third sphere focuses on relationship to the environment, but I suggested it is missing a step that allowed students to feel connected to community and a specific place. The important constituent here is the connection between the learner and the place that allows for student learning to occur. Finally, an additional sphere to deepen Sauv 's (2009) framework is inclusion of connection to the natural world through mindfulness, yoga movement, and connection to place to foster overall well-being. This sphere acts as the connection to the natural world that links all other spheres together (see Figure 2). In re-visioning and subsuming Sauv 's tenets, this conceptual framework included student well-being at its core and environmental connections at its periphery; the revised model worked more cohesively for this research.

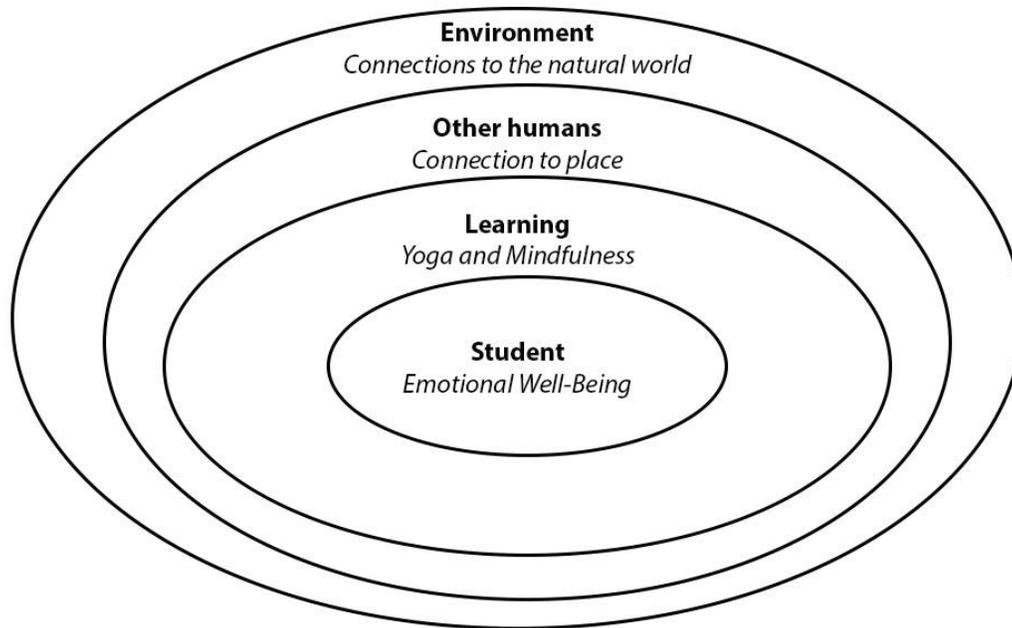


Fig. 2: Author's conceptual framework for this research, adapted from Sauvé's (2009) framework

My research attempted to fill a gap in the research literature. While some research has been conducted on mindfulness and its benefits (e.g., Noddings, 1992; Rechtschaffen, 2014; Bai & Cohen, 2008), there has been little research that examines yoga and mindfulness as a form of environmental education that nurtures student well-being. Using my conceptual framework, I investigated the various spheres while exploring the natural world through yoga and mindfulness and their connections to student well-being.

### Research Question/Methods

How does moving through the four interrelated spheres of the conceptual framework allow students to express their feelings and expressions of well-being? Through artwork and discussions, the students showed me the connections they made to nature, to their community, and to their well-being by exploring yoga and mindfulness in the natural world. I interpreted their journey of discovering deeper connections to their own well-being through narrative reflection as researcher-educator.

**Specifics of the study.** This research study was conducted during a community-based children's yoga program that I led with four elementary-aged student participants. I had three primary sources of data: circle discussions, student journals (which included artefacts like drawings and poetry), and my own researcher journal. For the circle discussion groups, I made brief notes during the discussion of main points or phrases that felt meaningful to me and to my research. Immediately following the classes, I would then go home and spend two to three hours journaling and reflecting on what was said by the students, interpreting using my conceptual framework. During this time, I practised self-reflection, one of the four levels of reflections in education—surface, pedagogical, critical, and self-reflection—described by Larrivee and Cooper (2006). After each class, I would make notes about the students' journals and what they shared with the group. One aim was to develop and document my understanding and

interpretation of student connections to well-being through my conceptual framework. As an educator, I wanted to teach about feelings that led to my interpretation of well-being through discussions of understanding, compassion, love, wholeness, and inclusion. The discussions and journal entries were inspired through yoga and mindfulness in the natural world. I wanted to authentically record in my reflection journal what I saw and felt when observing and conversing with the students.

The classes were held once a week for one hour with each session focusing on a new mindfulness component, yoga practice, and outdoor experience. The lessons on mindfulness and meditation were inspired by Rechtschaffen's (2014) eight-week lesson plans of: "Opening mindful moment; check-in and report back; new lesson introduction; practice; sharing/council; journaling/artwork; world discovery; closing mindful moment" (p. 145). Each class comprised a journaling component both prior to and following an outdoor yoga and/or mindfulness experience and the creation of an artistic piece by the group. Each component of the class took between 15 to 20 minutes of the hour. I believe that this flow matched well with my framework of four spheres: student emotional well-being; learning yoga and mindfulness practices; connection to place and community; and connection to the natural world (see Figure 2). Each of these spheres was included in each of the eight lessons designed to deepen students' mindfulness and ecological literacy through yoga practices and, in turn, their well-being.

## **Gathering Data**

The required ethics approval was obtained from my home university's Research Ethics Board. I took notes during each class based on observations of the students' body language, word choice, and facial expressions. These notes were taken while the students were speaking. I had discussed at the beginning of the first session that I would be writing notes and there were no "wrong answers." I would jot down a phrase or key points to help me remember what was talked about, then, after the session was complete, wrote reflections in my researcher journal. I did this in a quiet location that allowed me to write undistracted. Using my notes to help me remember smaller details, I relied heavily on my memory and the feelings that I had while observing the students' journals, discussions, and actions.

The group circle discussions pertained to topics that emerged naturally during student conversations. I prepared questions ahead of time to kick off discussions, but many times the topics veered off from where I thought we might go, which was fine given I wanted to see what naturally emerged. Each session would typically begin with a conversation about their journals that they would show me when they entered the room. These gave me a window into what was on their minds and a starting place for discussion. Later, as we ventured outside we would talk about natural things that we saw. I would ask about the weather or wonder out loud about something that we encountered on the walk outside. The students had the opportunity to express their thoughts, opinions, and ideas in each class through their journaling, movement (yoga postures), pictures, poetry, dance, speech, or any other form of communication they chose. I welcomed all forms of art and communication. To aid my memory, I took photos of their drawings and journals after the session was complete. I would always ask their permission before I took a photo and every time I asked, all four students gave me permission. I always made sure

their names and faces were not obvious in any of the photos and would upload them onto my computer at home and save them under their pseudonyms.

## Analyzing the Data

Once the data were gathered, I analyzed them by using my conceptual framework (see Figure 2). I reflected on the sessions: what was talked about, what the students drew or wrote in their journals, and what happened while we were outside doing yoga and engaging in mindfulness practices. I linked my observations to the four spheres of my conceptual framework. For example, if a student talked about how mindfulness helped them feel peaceful, I would link that to the mindfulness sphere and note that feelings of peace applied also to the student's overall well-being.

It was through rich description that the presentation of the findings became trustworthy. Following Patton (2002), trustworthiness was built through three ways of data gathering: open-ended conversations, direct observation, and written documents. In my study, the written documents were the notes and my research journal as well as student artwork, poetry, and journals. I took the students' words and artwork as representations of their connections with the natural world as interpreted through me. I attempted, as best as conceivably possible, to maintain neutrality and to listen and see (facial/body cues and expressions) what the students were saying. I could not actually *know* what students were thinking and feeling, but I felt that through our conversations and my observations I could interpret their words authentically and then link them to the conceptual framework.

## Findings and Discussion

To protect the anonymity of the students, their names have been changed to pseudonyms that I assigned. Dakota was 11; Devon is Dakota's brother, 9 and the only male student in the class; Casey was 11; and Jamie was 9, and had just moved to Canada from the United States. Jamie joined Snowga one week later than the rest of the group.

**Themes.** The following section outlines the themes from my conceptual framework: moving through the spheres beginning with student emotional well-being, to learning yoga and mindfulness, then to connections to community and place, and finally connections to the natural world.

**Sphere one: Student emotional well-being.** This sphere was one of the easiest spheres for the group to move through. The students' journals showed me where the students were each day at the beginning and end of the sessions as they could articulate what was on their minds in those moments. They often began the sessions by focusing on either past or future events. Typically, the first journal of each class portrayed an intense emotion, either something they were very excited about or something that they were very upset about, with some even describing both in the same entry. One example can be found in Devon's journal entry (see Figure 3) where he lost his mitten on the way to Snowga. An excerpt from my reflective journal read:

*He entered our room visibly distraught: his eyes and face were red and he was sniffing back tears as he told us, "I lost my mitten and it was really important to me. My mom and dad said they would look for it, but I think it's gone." He buried his face in his elbow on the table. His sister Dakota patted him gently on the back, "We'll find it," she whispered. Everyone including me nodded in agreement. "We'll all keep our eyes peeled for it when we walk outside to our spot under the tree. Maybe it fell near the entrance," I suggested. When we finished the Snowga lesson, the mitten was still nowhere to be found, but Devon appeared to be much more cheerful and did not mention the mitten again. Luckily, at the end of class when his parents picked him up, they brought good news. They found the mitten in the driveway at home!*

I found the transition between the first and second journal entries of each child interesting; it varied among students over the weeks depending on what was going on in each student's life. As a class, we spoke about being in the present moment as mindfulness.

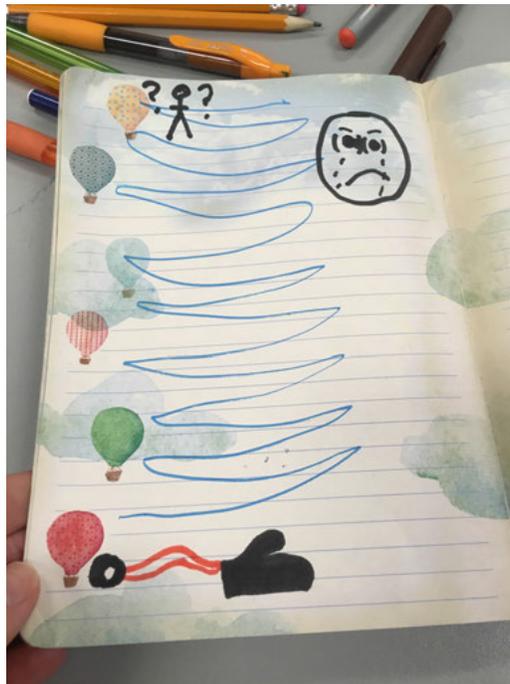


Fig. 3: Devon's "Missing Mitten" journal entry

**Sphere two: Learning yoga and mindfulness.** Yoga and mindfulness (in the natural world) were the key elements of Snowga and the backbone of the entire conceptual framework. Each week through yoga and mindfulness, I watched the students form stronger connections to each other and to the place where we practiced. The students showed through their journaling—typically in their second journal entry of the session—that they were shifting from a past or future focus to mindfulness. I believe that this shift came, in large part, because the yoga and mindfulness exercises were conducted outside.

I observed and later wrote about the transformation I witnessed in the students each time we went outside. In doing yoga exercises—whether partner yoga (yoga poses done with a partner, in unison, focusing on breathing together and moving together), chanting *ohm* together, stretching, sequencing, or group work—the students experienced the outdoors together as a group and, in turn, grew as a group. An example

of their growth as a group came from observing the smiles and the laughter (signs I interpreted as visual well-being) as they became more comfortable with one another over the weeks. I also noted they were more playful in their movements outside than when sitting inside around a table, on hard plastic chairs. The squirming and moving was welcome outside, while in the classroom they appeared less comfortable.

*Following our nature walk, the students depicted their experiences in their journals, which they then shared in circle discussions. Casey described a drawing that focused on her five senses: “Touch—I couldn’t feel anything because of my mittens, but I could feel that I had warm hands. The sound was quiet—I drew squiggly lines. Taste—it was nothing. Smell—I smelled fresh air outside, but now I smell chlorine inside. See—I could see the sunset—it represents nature and my heart” (see Figure 4). Moving through all five senses is a good example of what mindfulness is about, experiencing the world in different ways, in the present moment, as it exists and as you exist. Casey, using the description of “warm hands” and drawing the calm squiggly lines to show quiet and peace in light blue hues, showed me where she was in that moment; Casey was present, in the field, feeling and reflecting on being in nature. Again, it was more than her words I was interpreting, but also the colours, her calm smile, and the deep inhale as Casey said, “I smelled fresh air outside.” I must admit that the contrast between the fresh air and the smell of chlorine in the Sports Complex was surprising to me. Although I had noticed the smell of chlorine myself, I did not think that the smell would enter into their journals. Casey showed me that through all her senses, she was comparing the peaceful sensations of being outside (in the cold, no less) with the warm, chemical-filled air inside.*



Fig. 4: Casey's "Five Senses" journal entry

**Sphere three: Connections to community and place.** These two concepts did not correlate the way I expected them to. I speculated that the students would bond as a group and, together as a close community, immediately feel a strong connection to the place where we practiced, and that this would be represented in their journals. While they did make some connections to place—the field where we practiced each week—by the time we traveled back inside to journal, I think they forgot about these connections and focused on what might have been the more fun parts of their outdoor experience. While we were outside they were playful and clearly enjoying being outside in a natural area, as I mentioned before, only sometimes they would write about their nature connection in their journal and other times they would write about their plans for later that night.

I did notice that each week the relationships among the students appeared to deepen, including into new friendships for those who did not previously know each other. I suspect this was largely due to partner and group yoga as I purposely paired them with a different partner each week. Dakota and Devon were siblings and both were friends with Casey before starting *Snowga*. Jamie was new to the group and at first participated by playing and exploring on her own, but by the end of the course in its entirety she would strike up conversations with Dakota, Devon, and Casey, seemingly comfortable. They talked about things they had in common or shared feelings about their outdoor experiences. The students told me throughout the sessions that they felt a connection to each other as a group, especially when they would hold hands in partner or group yoga. I too felt that connection and interpreted it as a positive outcome promoting the students' overall well-being.

**Sphere four: Connections to the natural world.** While the students were outside exploring, and enjoying the sunsets, genuine conversations occurred where they questioned and played freely. The words they used to describe their experiences were positive and enlightening.

Here is an excerpt from Week 7 of my journal that describes a typical moment we experienced together outside and the connections made by the children:

*We decided to take a wander through a small thicket of trees after yoga. The snow was very crunchy on top, but soft and deep underneath. The children enjoyed the experience of their feet falling through the snow; they had to struggle just to walk and laughed out loud as they helped one another out of the snow. As soon as we arrived by the trees—a mix of pine, birch, and cedar—Casey shouted, “Watch out for the rabbit poop!” Jamie was really interested in seeing the animal tracks and asked how long ago the tracks were made. Devon speculated that they looked pretty fresh. We walked by a big cedar tree and everyone climbed or touched the tree in some way. They seemed to enjoy the rough feel of the bark and the winding, meandering creases in the wood. Like the animal prints in the snow, the tree had untamed trails and grooves in its trunk as its bark naturally twisted up the tree. Jamie lifted a snow-laden mitten to move her hat that had gone awry and pointed to the top of the tree, “Hey, I think I see a nest or something up there.” I asked where that nest might have come from. Everyone gathered at the root of the tree and stared skyward. Puzzled, Jamie was frozen in place, but Casey started reaching for lower branches trying to hoist herself higher up. Devon spoke through squinted eyes, “I see white! Like egg shells! It must be a bird’s nest!” The energy level soared. Everyone nodded in agreement, craning their necks to get a better look. “Yep. That’s what it is,” he confirmed.*

*Before heading back inside, Dakota made a smiling face in the snow, cut it out, and because it was firm and sticky, was able to place it on the tree so others could see it (see Figure 5). Casey laughed and said the smiling face looked a bit like a scary face. Dakota told me, “I really like that the snow was so hard that I could cut out a mask from it. I hope people know that this is a happy face.” Casey assured her that people would know. As we walked back inside, Dakota wondered if the mask would still be there by next week.*

I could see glimpses of how our time together showed the students what it means to care for the self through mindfulness, and helped them develop a little community. By connecting with the self through movement, the students articulated in their journals and group discussions how they were able to release their stress through play, curiosity, yoga, and mindfulness. I argue that this is something that should be available for all students, not just those few, like these students, who register for a community recreation program like Snowga. I have learned much from this research and I feel comfortable looking forward and making some recommendations for both practice and future research.



Fig. 5: Dakota's smile mask

## **Implications for Practice**

First, I would recommend to teachers that yoga and mindfulness be incorporated in the classroom. In many cases teachers do not have the background or the training in mindfulness and/or yoga, so the first place to begin would be to implement teacher training into schools or provide incentives to motivate teachers to practice mindfulness and yoga in the outdoors on their own time. My opinion is that once teachers realize the benefits that come with practicing yoga and mindfulness regularly, they will feel inspired to implement it into their everyday schedules in their classroom. Yoga and mindfulness practices do not need to be relegated to an afterschool program, but neither do they need to be limited to specially allocated times during the day. Rather, these practices can be used frequently, whenever students need time to refocus (Hitzhusen, 2006). I realize that not every teacher will find the passion and motivation to implement or practice yoga and mindfulness on their own time, but my hope is that through research like mine teachers will find inspiration to bring these ideas into their classrooms and into their own lives.

I believe that this method of teaching can play an important part in promoting student well-being as a way of teaching about the self, mindfulness, yoga, community and the natural world. I think that my research is valuable because it provides some evidence that the techniques that I used, as derived from my sources (Adele, 2009; Kabat-Zinn, 1994; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Rechtschaffen, 2014; Sauv , 2009; Shanker, 2013; Stone, 2008; Zabel, 2013), may be effective in helping guide students to learn about, feel comfortable in, and feel connected with their well-being. Yoga and mindfulness practiced outside offers an opportunity to quiet the mind and body and appreciate what surrounds us here, in this present moment.

This research and method of teaching echoes the growing awareness that we, as educators, need to craft ways of enhancing the mental health and well-being of children. We need to develop new, or recover old, ways and focus our classrooms on the well-being of students. These practices are thousands of years old and based on traditions that have been proven in the past to bring peace and well-being to its practitioners (Rechtschaffen, 2014). It is important to schedule time for students to pause, reflect, meditate, and enjoy the present moment, and to just be children.

## **Implications for Research**

In terms of future research, there is so much more that remains to be discovered about the potential role of yoga and mindfulness in the natural world in order to foster student well-being. Conducting research on programs like *Snowga* with more students and over a longer period of time—over the course of a few months or a year, for example—would provide us with a better idea of how deep the learning and connections might go. I feel like we just skimmed the surface of what these students were feeling and were capable of. Through observations of and conversations with the students, I noticed that each moved through the four spheres identified in my framework. I imagine that with longer sessions several times in a week, there is real potential here for integrating yoga and mindfulness as a way of fostering well-being through connection to place and the natural world. I would like to see more research on this topic to see if my hunch is correct.

**Limitations.** There are always limitations in research, I can identify a number of limitations in mine. First, my research involved only four children between the ages of nine and eleven years who were fairly homogenous in their backgrounds. The generalizability to larger groups and students of different ages of learners is thus limited. One flipside of this limitation, however, with a small class of four, I was able as an educator to give each of the students much attention and as a researcher there was time for each of them to speak and be heard by all members of the group. Another limitation is that having only one hour for each session made it difficult to complete everything I originally planned and to have space for emergent conversations to fully unfold. Having more time would have benefitted the group, so if this program was to be implemented in a school setting, I would recommend more time be allotted.

## Final Reflection

Close your eyes for a moment and take in a long, deep breath. No matter where you are in the world, imagine that breath is full of fresh, clean air. Imagine the taste of that air as it fills your lungs. Feel your belly expand with air, as if your lungs just cannot get enough of it. When your breath is as full as can be, pause for a moment before slowly exhaling all the air back out. Imagine that each time you breathe in, you breathe in that fresh, cool, air with a familiar lingering scent. Feel all your stresses melt away as you release not only the breath, but any tension you're holding as well. Enjoy that moment of "freshness" as my students would say. An excerpt from my last reflection speaks to my final thoughts as researcher/educator:

*As I walk out of the building, into the parking lot towards my car, my head swirls for just a second. I stop to catch myself and the realization hits me—Snowga is over. In a moment of reflection, I find myself feeling sad, nostalgic even. I gaze across the fenced lot to the field where we spent eight evenings. I wonder when I'll look over at that field or sit there again. Will my students stop by and explore the thicket of trees without me? Will they be inspired to explore other thickets? Did I fulfill my "teacher" duties for these students? Did I accomplish all that I set out to do?*

In those last moments before heading home, my heart was full of hope. Although it had only been eight short sessions, I felt I was leaving a class I had taught for a year. I knew these students and felt a connection to them and to our special place. I realized right then and there that this love of teaching was the reason that I first entered the field of education. I feel passionate about inspiring those around me to feel balanced, included, and connected (Miller, 2007). Everyone deserves to feel love, affection, and belonging, and everyone deserves to interact with the natural world. The *Anne of Green Gables* within me would be proud.

Movement, breath work, mindfulness, community, and place are all elements that bring benefits to our lives and that engender light and warm fuzzy feelings in the heart. They promote an "ecological connection" (Thomashow, 1995) with the natural world and an overarching sense of well-being. Everyone deserves this, and I believe it is my job to bring the mystery, beauty, curiosity, and positive feelings that are important in ecological connection to benefit students' overall well-being.

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# Changing Perceptions About Changes in the Teen Brain: An Overview

Carol Goldfus and Anit Karny-Tagger

## Abstract

Education changes the brain. The purpose of this meta-review is to afford teachers access to the most up-to-date research regarding principal neuro-processes of adolescent development and behavior to improve students' well-being and motivation in the classroom. This includes facets such as emotional, social, risk and reward mechanisms, stressors, technology, and learning. Understanding the scientific basis behind processes, such as learning and memory, empowers teachers with the knowledge to quantify the effects of their teaching on the brain, to facilitate successful learning, and to contribute to the present as well as future health and well-being of their adolescent students.

## Background

Adolescence is a period characterized by change: hormonal, physical, psychological, and social (Choudhury, Charman, & Blakemore, 2008). In recent years, with the increasing development and use of brain imaging technologies such as fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), there has been an accumulation of findings on the structural and functional changes that occur in the developing adolescent brain. These findings have enabled scientists to study how the brain changes over time, and are beginning to shed light on some of the behavioral characteristics of teens. They suggest that the brain of a teenager really is different, that it is still very much a work in progress and functions quite differently from the brain of an adult. While there are areas of the brain that are fully developed, there are other areas responsible for executive functioning, like planning ahead and weighing priorities, that continue to develop well into our 20s (Johnson, Blum, & Giedd, 2009).

These developments are extremely relevant for educators. By introducing cognitive neuroscience into education, teachers would be provided with a conceptual framework integrating neural, cognitive, linguistic, and developmental science, rather than only pedagogy. The changing adolescent brain is extremely malleable and sensitive to the effects of the environment. Although this makes adolescence a time of vulnerability, it also makes it an opportunity for education.

It has become apparent that connectedness to school during adolescence plays a significant role in building protective elements for positive educational outcomes and lower health-risk behaviors. Schools are accessible and relatively stable sites, and as such, can promote adolescent connectedness at a time characterized by transition and change in multiple areas, such as identity and peer and family relationships. Therefore, schools have an important role in affecting academic and vocational pathways,

as well as present and future health and well-being (Bond et al., 2007).

There is enormous opportunity for brain science to shed light on the strengths of the adolescent brain (Johnson et al., 2009). Thus, the role of the teacher in the classroom is particularly significant during this period, since they have daily direct contact with students. Teachers can help adolescents acquire skills associated with areas of the brain that undergo the greatest change, such as self-control, goal setting, and planning. Teaching students emotional regulation strategies can help them cope with challenges so as to reduce their vulnerability to the adverse effects of the environment.

However, to achieve this, neuroscience has to be made accessible to educators. The aim of this article is to present an overview of state-of-the-art research about the teenage brain and to place this knowledge within an educational framework. Neuroscience does not provide teaching methods or procedures; it demands an integration of educational and pedagogical research. Understanding the functional brain is a first step to empirically developing teaching methods based on neuroscience in order to meet the needs of students in middle and secondary schools. This can lead to policies that promote adolescent health and well-being (Johnson et al., 2009).

The brain develops through its experiential interactions with the environment. We are born with the basic building blocks and blueprint intact, which are our genetic program and neurons that communicate with each other throughout life (Hardy, 2012). Learning involves the construction of a network of connections that is constantly sculpted through the strengthening of some synapses and the elimination of others (neuroplasticity). The timing and intensity of this evolution varies between brain regions and among people. Although this process continues throughout life, there are certain points in time that are more significant for learning certain skills; for example, language (Blakemore & Frith, 2005). These are windows of opportunity for building new pathways as well as strengthening existing ones. They can be utilized by making a deliberate selection of our experiences and our activities (Goldfus, 2013).

The last two decades have revealed that one of these windows of opportunity is adolescence. Until recently, it was assumed that brain development was essentially complete by the age of twelve. We know today that the brain continues developing for much longer (Feinstein, 2011). Consequently, our view on this stage of life is changing. We are beginning to understand that childhood to adulthood is not a simple transition, but a vital developmental stage (Goddings, Heyes, Bird, Viner, & Blakemore, 2012).

Although it was recognized that, during this period, children develop to a great extent, both socially and cognitively, not much thought was given to the effect of the brain's maturation on these developments (Choudhury et al., 2008). For many years, scientists could not detect a link between an improvement in cognitive performance and physical changes in the brain (Steinberg, 2011). In 1890, William James had already suggested a link between biology and behavior, but until recently, we could only speculate, since we did not have the tools to observe what was actually happening inside the brain. Research on the adolescent brain remained unreachable: "Wrapped in a tough leathery membrane, surrounded by a protective moat of fluid and completely encased in bone, the brain is well protected from falls, attacks from predators, and the curiosity of neuroscientists" (Giedd, 2008, p. 335). It was thought that adolescent

behavior was due to hormonal activity and puberty (Goddings et al., 2012). However, although the timing of puberty and adolescence overlap, the terms are not the same. Rosenblum (1990) wrote that, “although one may define puberty in specific neuro-endocrinological terms,... adolescence is, of its essence, a period of transition rather than a moment of attainment, and so, it is difficult to distinguish its beginning or end” (Spear, 2000, p. 417).

The 20th century brought an array of technologies. The invention of functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) launched a new era of adolescent neuroscience. It combines radio waves, strong magnetic fields, and sophisticated computer technology to produce accurate information about the physiology of the growing human brain. This procedure permits the safe scanning of healthy children, even more than once during their development (Giedd et al., 2010). This allows for a better understanding of the change in communication patterns connecting different regions of the brain during development (Steinberg, 2011).

In 1991, Dr. Jay Giedd began the first long-term, longitudinal study of the changes going on in the adolescent brain by using MRI scans of some 1,800 teenagers over a number of years (Giedd, 2003). The accumulated and analyzed data from these longitudinal studies yielded new information for researchers. It seems that although by the age of six our brain is about 95% of its adult size, maximum brain size does not mean brain maturity. There are still profound structural changes that take place within the brain during adolescence which continue until our mid-20s (Johnson et al., 2009).

Three main changes were revealed by the cumulative neuroimaging research of adolescents: over-production of gray matter, synaptic pruning, and myelination.

### **Over-Production of Gray Matter and Synaptic Pruning**

The first change is an overproduction of gray matter, which are the nerve cells themselves, and the formation of new connections, especially in the prefrontal cortex. This process of the thickening of the gray matter or synaptic density is called “synaptogenesis” and can last up to several months or years. It peaks at about the same time as puberty, age 11 in girls and age 12 in boys. This peak is followed by a decline, a process of competitive elimination called “pruning,” where the excess connections are eliminated and a stabilization of synaptic density to adult levels is reached (Choudhury et al., 2008). This pattern extends to several related elements, such as the number of synapses, glucose use, and density of neurotransmitter receptors (Giedd, 2008). This inverted u-shaped process of thickening and thinning of gray matter (Blakemore & Mills, 2014) is not a change in the actual number of brain cells, but the growth in size and complexity of previously existing brain cells into extra branches, twigs, and roots, growing thicker and making more connections to other neural cells (Giedd, 2003). Giedd (2008) describes this maturation of the brain not as the addition of new letters, but of “combining earlier formed letters into words, and then words into sentences, and then sentences into paragraphs” (p. 340).

Scientists recognized that this process occurred in the womb and in the sensory motor associated areas of the brain during the first four years of life (Choudhury et al., 2008), but only after Giedd's (2003)

longitudinal study has this second wave of synaptogenesis at the onset of puberty been noted. This process involves an increase in connectivity between the different brain components, which become more integrated. Giedd et al. (2008) noted that this growth in associative cognitive activity is, in fact, a representation of the attainment of knowledge (Feinstein, 2011).

The teenage brain goes through extensive pruning, a process which is greatly influenced by the environment, operating according to the principle of "use it or lose it," discarding unused synaptic connections and strengthening ones that are active. This process refines and sharpens the capabilities of the evolving nervous system, making it less encumbered and more efficient (Feinstein, 2011). This means there are fewer, more specialized nerve cells (Hinton, Miyamoto, & Della-Chiesa, 2008). The important attribute to emerge from imaging studies is the extreme plasticity of the developing brain, allowing experiences to shape the brain (Giedd, 2003), which is relevant to all teachers involved in teaching adolescents.

## **Myelination**

These experience-dependent changes of neuronal connections that are thought to be the biological basis of memory eventually accumulate to a significant reorganization in certain brain structures (Hinton et al., 2008). Scientist Gerald Edelman (1993) calls this "neural Darwinism," the survival of the fittest synapses.

The neuron pathways that survive "pruning" not only survive, but also get stronger and more stable; small pathways grow into better organized systems of "superhighways" (Steinberg, 2011, p. 70); they go on to be insulated and to improve their performance. A layer of myelin is formed around the axon, from supporting "glial" cells (Choudhury et al., 2008). Myelin is a fatty substance that acts like an insulator, speeding up the transmission of information by electrical impulses from neuron to neuron to a hundred times faster (Giedd, 2003). It appears white in MRI scans and so is sometimes called "white matter." Sensory and motor brain regions are fully myelinated in the first few years of life, but as Yakovlev and Lecours (1967) stated, frontal cortex neurons continue to be myelinated well into adolescence (Feinstein, 2011). Another white matter area that undergoes substantial changes during adolescence is the left arcuate fasciculus, which connects Wernicke's area (reception of speech) with Broca's area (production of speech). A study revealed that the white matter providing connections between the hippocampus (related to long-term memory [LTM]) and the frontal cortex was especially active during adolescence; this could suggest an increasing ability to draw upon memories of past events in decision making (Giedd, 2004). Clear connections have been established between sensory and motor functions and the myelination of their neuroanatomical foundations (Giedd, 2003).

Acknowledgment of the importance of white matter growth for brain function has encouraged the development of new imaging techniques; for example, diffusion tensor imaging (DTI) and magnetization transfer (MT), which can be used to evaluate myelination and lucidity of white matter tracts. These new methods further confirm an increase in white matter arrangement throughout adolescence, which correlates in specific brain regions with cognitive improvements in language (Nagy, Westerberg, &

Klingberg, 2004), in reading (Deutsch et al., 2005), in the ability to inhibit a response (Liston et al., 2006; Nagy, Westerberg, & Klingberg, 2004), and in memory (Giedd et al., 2010).

As myelination expands throughout the adolescent brain, an increase in working memory and ease and competence is experienced with learning (Feinstein, 2011). In practical terms, the activities in which an adolescent participates are the ones that are myelinated. Whether it is playing sports, a computer game, a musical instrument, or reading, or riskier activities such as smoking or using drugs, the neural pathways that are associated with those activities are the ones that will be hardwired in the adolescent's brain. Thus, the activities of the adolescent can have a powerful influence on the ultimate physical structure of the brain (Giedd, 2003).

Another important modification that is characteristic of adolescence is a shifting balance between competing neural systems. Although synaptic pruning occurs throughout infancy, childhood, and adolescence, different brain regions are pruned at different points of development (Steinberg, 2011). This means that various cognitive and emotional networks mature at a different pace (Choudhury et al., 2008). The direction of brain maturation is from bottom up and inside out. Gradually the proportion of activity, in a range of cognitive tasks, shifts from the limbic/subcortical to the frontal lobes (Giedd, 2008). The most profound changes in the adolescent brain take place in the front part of the brain (Steinberg, 2011). The prefrontal cortex, with its executive functioning, is assumed to be associated with abilities such as response inhibition, attention, regulation of emotion, organization, and long-range planning. These faculties are thought to rely a great deal on the frontal lobe network. Basic abilities, such as those involving memory, attention, and logical reasoning, can develop by the age of 15; others, like thinking ahead, balancing risks and rewards, mature relatively late, even into the mid-20s (Giedd, 2008). The two main changes that take place are:

- A more focused activation within the prefrontal cortex.
- The activation of several brain regions simultaneously and in coordination within it as well as with other regions like the limbic system (Steinberg, 2011).

Additionally, some changes in limbic (emotional) reward and motivational systems appear to be linked with the beginning of puberty, while other changes transpire earlier or well after the arrival of puberty (Goddings et al., 2012).

## **Mentalization**

Choudhury (2010) proposed that adolescence is a time of particular cultural susceptibility, and Crone and Dahl (2012) noted that the impact of puberty on the brain makes adolescents particularly sensitive to their social environments (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Frith (2008) explains that social cognition involves the ability to make sense of the world through processing signals generated by members of the same species (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Some call this ability "mentalization," which emerges from developmental changes in the physical structure of the brain. Increase in white matter speeding communication between neurons, growing complexity of brain networks suggested by gray matter

changes, and environmentally sensitive plasticity are all essential aspects in a child's ability to mentalize and maintain the adaptive flexibility necessary for healthy progress into adulthood (Giedd, 2003).

One of the first studies to investigate the influence of puberty on the "mentalizing network" of the social brain was a study by Goddings and her colleagues (2012) that explored the influence of puberty on social emotion processing in adolescence. The sample consisted of 42 female adolescents (11 to 13 years) at different measured stages of puberty; their brains were scanned during a mentalizing task. It was observed that while some changes that happen in the "mentalizing" network were affected by the hormone activity of puberty, other changes were related to chronological age development and were not affected by puberty. Furthermore, researchers speculated that the limbic regions contain large numbers of sex hormone receptors that are affected by the increase in sex hormones during puberty, which might have a direct effect on the activation of the anterior temporal cortex (ATC) in social cognition tasks. Researchers suggested that the changes or decreases in activity in the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (DMPFC) region, which are not affected by the hormonal changes of puberty, might be the result of age-dependent neuroanatomical maturation; in other words, experience. The more experience an adolescent gains the less neuro-cognitive effort he or she needs to perform prefrontal-based cognitive operations. But the important point is that changes in social brain activity during adolescence are not under the control of a single system. Instead, these changes may be related to both age and puberty in different ways, and have both biological and environmental drivers (Goddings et al., 2012)

Some basic perceptual social cognitive processes develop rapidly from birth, such as face recognition (Farroni et al. 2005), biological motion detection (Pelphrey & Carter, 2008), and joint attention (Carpenter, Nagello, & Tomasello, 1998). Recent studies have shown that the more complex social processes, such as understanding the mental states of others (Blakemore et al., 2007), social emotional processing (Burnett, Bird, Moll, Frith, & Blakemore, 2009) and negotiating complex interpersonal decisions (Crone, 2013), continue to develop throughout adolescence (reviewed in Apperly, 2010; Blakemore, 2012).

The emotional brain systems of adolescents are changing; their prefrontal cortex is developing and they process social signals differently than adults or children. "Brain maturation involves a progressive 'frontalization' of function whereby the prefrontal cortex gradually assumes primary responsibility for many of the cognitive processes initially performed by more primitive subcortical and limbic structures" (Yurgelun-Todd & Killgore, 2006, p. 194).

Yurgelun-Todd and Killgore (2006) showed that adolescents also differ from adults in their ability to read and understand emotions in the faces of others. In fact, teens and adults actually use different regions of the brain to respond to certain tasks. In a study they conducted, a researcher displayed pictures of people with fearful expressions to teenagers between the ages of 11 and 17 while scanning their brains using fMRI. They found that, compared to adults, the frontal lobes of teens (the seat of goal-oriented rational thinking) are less active and their amygdala (a structure in the temporal lobe that is involved in discriminating fear and other emotions) is more active. One hundred percent of adults identified fear, while fewer than 50% of adolescents did. The teens often misread facial expressions, with those under

14 years of age more often seeing sadness, anger, or confusion, instead of fear. Older teenagers were more often correct and showed a progressive shift of activity from the amygdala to the frontal lobes. The results suggest that in adolescents the insight, reasoning, and judgment power of the frontal cortex is not being used during the task as it is in adults. Teens process information differently from adults and they respond differently to the outside world (Yurgelun-Todd & Killgore, 2006).

### **The Social/Emotional Brain**

It is no secret that teenagers like to spend much of their time with other adolescents. As adolescents mature, relationships with friends become more central to their life. It is a basic human need and important for social integration and a sense of belonging to a group of peers. The peer group is an important source of social support for adolescents during this potentially confusing time, with whom they can share similar feelings and feel they are not alone, especially in light of the process of distancing from parents that characterizes this period (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007; Sroufe, Cooper, & DeHart, 1996; Brown & Larson, 2009). Peers can function as role models, allowing alternative models that encourage the formation of self-identity (Steinberg, 2011). Peer evaluation affects adolescents' feelings of social or personal worth (Blakemore & Mills, 2014), but is also a source of temptation and risk, and can cause feelings of isolation and depression if the adolescent feels unaccepted by friends or is the victim of bullying (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). In their study, Hartup and Stevens (1997) showed a link between the existence of social support and an adolescent's positive self-esteem, sense of belonging, and feeling optimistic about future interpersonal relationships (cited in Valkenburg & Peter, 2009). Brown and Larson (2009) indicate that adolescents learn to develop an intimate relationship with peers that includes openness, honesty, loyalty, and trust. There is also a gradual attraction to the opposite sex (or the subject of attraction), enabling the development of romantic relationships of love and trust (Steinberg, 2011).

Furthermore, teenagers generally become sexually active during adolescence, enabling expressions of sexual feelings, physical enjoyment of contact with others, which exposes them to questions of sexual morality and sexual identity (Steinberg, 2011). There are also expectations from parents and teachers, and society in general, that teens take more responsibility for their own lives, and contribute to others (Ziv, 1984). In order to become productive members of society, adolescents must learn to navigate these social complexities.

### **Stress**

Adolescence is a time of significant developmental changes from childhood to adulthood, a transition which Dorn and Chrousos (1993) perceived as a chronic state of threatened stability (Spear, 2000); their ability to exercise effective cognitive and emotion regulation is still relatively immature (Somerville, Jones, & Casey, 2010). It is imperative for adolescents to develop their adaptive response skills in order to become stable independent adults. Therefore, adolescence can be considered almost by definition as a stressful life stage (Spear, 2000). It is a period characterized by a heightened tendency to experience negative and widely fluctuating mood states (Somerville et al., 2010); both the type of stressors and the

responses made are in flux (Romeo, 2013). What may seem like a mild incident to an adult is perceived as an intense emotional trigger in adolescents, leading to negative effects (Somerville, 2010). The heightened vulnerability to psychiatric conditions during adolescence has been proposed to relate to genetically preprogrammed neural development at the same time as new stresses and challenges emerge in the environment (Andersen & Teicher, 2008; Leussis & Andersen, 2008; Blakemore & Mills, 2014). The majority of anxiety disorders emerge during adolescence (Den & Richardson, 2013). Most seem to be in part precipitated by situations that are stressful life events in adolescence. These can be changing schools, rapid growth and change in body shape, family relationships (preadolescents), the social stress of negative peer-related experiences (early adolescence), academic issues (older adolescence) (Spear, 2000). Spear (2009) and others have associated pubertal maturation with elevated physiological reactivity to emotional cues, and Schulz, Molenda-Figueira, and Sisk (2009), with adaptations in limbic circuitry (Pattwell, Lee, & Casey, 2013). Enhanced plasticity creates greater vulnerability (Andersen, 2003). A lack of prefrontal control may lead to reduced emotional regulation capacities, resulting in unreserved highly emotional responses (Somerville et al., 2010). All these challenges can be overwhelming for the adolescent (Spear, 2000).

Two hormonal systems are activated to help an individual cope when faced with stressors. The first is an immediate response of the "fright-flight" reaction, while the second is a slower process mediated by the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis which secretes glucocorticoids (i.e., cortisol) (Romeo, 2013). These are responsible for the different adaptive physiological and behavioral responses to stress, such as mobilizing energy stores, enhancing immune reactions, and increasing learning and memory abilities (Romeo, 2013). Exposure to mild stress during pubertal transition in rats motivates them to accelerate behavior toward independence such as increased risk-taking and novelty seeking, and decreased anxious behavior in later adolescence. Human adolescents within socially unpredictable environments showed decreased short-term physical and mental health. They also adopt faster life history strategies, such as decreased health and less sexual restrictedness (Brumbach, Figueredo, & Ellis, 2009; Blakemore & Mills, 2014). However, chronic exposure to stress-induced hormones can lead to short- and long-term maladaptive outcomes, such as metabolic disorders, as well as impaired immune and cognitive functions. Giedd and Rapoport (2010) stated that recent neuroimaging studies indicate that the areas that are most sensitive to stress in adulthood (specifically the hippocampus, prefrontal cortex, and amygdala) all continue to mature during adolescence (Romeo, 2013).

Finally, emotion is extremely relevant to education, especially in the context of stress. Low levels of stress can be positive and may even contribute to motivation. However, elevated levels of frequent or extended stress can be toxic to the brain. Neuroscience research informs us that positive social interactions releases oxytocin. This hormone assists our ability to connect and bond with others and reduces stress (Feinstein, 2011; Steinberg, 2008).

## **Risk and Reward**

Adolescence is frequently characterized as a health paradox. On the one hand, it is a time of increased physical and mental capabilities. On the other, however, generally, mortality and injury rates increase

significantly from childhood to adolescence, often due to preventable causes (Willoughby, Good, Adachi, Hamza, & Tavernier, 2013). These may result from decisions and actions that give rise to an increase in occurrences of unintentional injuries and violence, alcohol and drug abuse, unintended pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases (Rodrigo, Padrón, De Vega, & Ferstl, 2014). Researchers propose that the reason for this lies in the nucleus accumbens (Galvan et al., 2006), in the ventral striatum. These pleasure-seeking reward systems in the teen's brain develop faster than the frontal cortex (the "CEO"), which regulates delay of gratification, thinking ahead, and judgment. This gap in timing may help explain some of the typical behavior during this period of life. This functional transformation involves the limbic system with changes in levels of several neurotransmitters, dopamine that is associated with how we perceive reward, and serotonin which is associated with our moods (Steinberg, 2011).

The reward centers of the adolescent brain are a great deal more active than those of children or adults, making teens more prone to risky, impulsive behaviors (Hoboken et al., 2011; Somerville et al., 2010). They do evaluate risk; they just weigh risk and reward differently (Steinberg, 2011), leaning more toward reward. They prefer decisions that provide immediate reward, particularly social rewards, which teens might be more susceptible to (Darby, Del Piero, Immordino-Yang, Kaplan, & Margolin, 2015).

They are much more likely to make risky decisions in the presence of peers, when there is potential for peer approval or a way to avoid social exclusion (Blakemore & Robbins, 2012; Blakemore & Mills, 2014). Susceptibility to peer influence rises during mid-adolescence (Steinberg, 2011). Gardner and Steinberg (2005) examined how the presence of peers is likely to influence adolescents to take risks in a driving game. Three age groups participated: adolescents (13 to 16 years), young adults (18 to 22 years), and adults (24+ years). When alone, they all took the same number of risks, but when in the presence of their peers, adolescents took significantly more risks than the adult or youth groups (Blakemore & Mills, 2014).

Recent studies emphasize the association between different neural systems as well as on how social context and individual traits affect these behaviors (Willoughby et al., 2013). An important point to remember is that sometimes taking a risk may result in the preferred outcome (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). The adolescent brain's extreme plasticity makes this period a window of opportunity for learning (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). New findings about the brain can be an opportunity for new improved approaches to teaching (Posner & Rothbart, 2005). Educators should provide meaningful learning experiences with ongoing guidance that enables students at all levels to advance toward mastery of a common set of skills (Hinton et al., 2012). Student-centered approaches to learning require pupils to be self-directed and responsible for their own learning, which demands executive functioning skills such as goal setting, planning, and monitoring progress (Hinton et al., 2012). The prefrontal lobe responsible for control and monitoring, organization, and prioritizing, is still developing. Thus, educators ought to teach the executive functions and not take for granted that the middle school students know these functions. This knowledge has implications for the classroom. This is an example of how awareness of prefrontal lobe development creates the understanding to teach executive skills to automaticity and how the teaching environment can provide the necessary cues for coping with the academic world.

It is important to remember that areas in the brain which are not used will be eliminated (Choudhury et al., 2008). Furthermore, teachers should take into account the emotional brain; teens are sensitive to reward (dopamine) (Spear, 2000), making learning a positive rewarding experience. It is important to remember that environments that promote positive relationships and a sense of community promote learning (Hinton et al., 2012). This is especially true in adolescents who are motivated by social rewards (peers' acceptance) (Guyer, Choate, Pine, & Nelson, 2012), and more vulnerable to stress (Blakemore & Mills, 2014). The amygdala is accessed directly for decision-making, creating vulnerability to stress. Knowledge of these facts provides educators with an opportunity to help students thrive academically by creating a learning environment that shelters students from toxic stress (Hinton et al., 2012).

Educators might have limited influence on students' friendships, but they can use group work assignments in class. This strategy can create a stress-free learning environment by facilitating positive social interactions, which can encourage a sense of community to counteract loneliness and teach students emotional regulation strategies (Feinstein, 2011; Hinton et al., 2012).

Emotion can help students remember better (Immordino-Yang & Fischer, 2009); therefore, it can be valuable to use it as part of lesson content. Teens have less ability to manage or read emotions in others, so teachers should make sure that their students understand what they mean, and what they expect. The teen brain is programmed to make connections between different parts of itself (Steinberg, 2008) Thus, it might be productive to present tasks that combine several abilities, promoting those connections. Teens are still learning how to understand (i.e., abstract thinking is newly developed); teachers can connect lesson content to their interests, to what they already know and enjoy. Give them time to process new information. Teens are novelty seekers, so it might be constructive to diversify lesson resources.

## Conclusion

This paper makes a case for empowering teachers with updated information from neuroscience so that they might apply this knowledge in their teaching. This knowledge can allow teachers a better understanding of how to manage cognitive, social, and emotional difficulties that can be characteristic of this age. The emotional and social dimensions of learning may have a deeper impact on students' lives than what appears on the surface, especially at this age (Immordino-Yang, 2011). The environment or experiences created by teachers have an impact on the development of the physical structure of their students' brains. Providing teachers with this new knowledge about adolescent neurological development, combined with their own hands-on experience, can provide them with the opportunity to modify their educational practices which, in turn, can help develop new educational theories that capitalize on the unique neurological characteristics of adolescence.

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# **“Let’s Just Stop and Take a Breath”: A Community-Driven Approach to Mindfulness Practice in a High Poverty Elementary School**

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## **Abstract**

This case study describes how a high-poverty, linguistically and culturally diverse elementary school came to embed mindfulness in its curriculum and what adults perceived to be the outcomes of the program on students’ well-being. This qualitative case study is based on 25 interviews with teachers, administrators, and community members; classroom observations; and relevant documents. Participants indicated that practicing mindfulness improved student well-being through greater self-awareness and increased ability to articulate their emotions and needs, select strategies to self-regulate, and generalize their practice of mindfulness to out-of-school settings. Implications for practice and research are discussed.

## **“Let’s Just Stop and Take a Breath”: A Community-Driven Approach to Mindfulness Practice in a High Poverty Elementary School**

More than 45 years ago, Paulo Freire (1970) argued for a dialectic that could help students “develop their power to perceive critically the way they exist in the world with which and in which they find themselves” (p. 83). School-based mindfulness can be one powerful way to promote the simultaneous dialectic that Freire and his contemporaries promote, whereby participants practice a type of “close-in” or bodily focused well-being alongside a “wide-open” critical thinking perspective, including a focus on academic success and the dynamics of the broader classroom, school, and community experience. Systematic approaches like The Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child Model (Lewallen, Hunt, Potts-Datema, Zaza, & Giles, 2015) to health and learning underscore, among other things, the importance of fostering social, emotional, and academic growth within schools, communities, and families. Central to this framework is the connection between education and health for students, who can benefit from improving their emotional well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Richards, 2012). Given that stress and anxiety can have a negative impact on classroom climate, creating educational spaces conducive to learning requires attention to be given to social and emotional learning as well as academic achievement (Gueldner & Feuerborn, 2016).

This integrative focus is particularly important given that nearly a third of the adolescent population qualifies as having an anxiety disorder (Merikangas et al., 2010). Schools with high percentages of low-income students, English Language Learners, and students with identified disabilities face intense

pressure (Linn, Baker, & Betebenner, 2002), and these schools often experience high teacher turnover due to high levels of stress associated with working conditions (Johnson, Kraft, & Papay, 2012). Substantial evidence suggests that poverty has an adverse effect on student achievement (Lacour & Tissington, 2011), health, and well-being. Social inequities such as a lack of access to jobs with livable wages, nutritional food, quality early childhood care, stable and affordable housing, and quality health care can create an unhealthy environment (Evans, 2004; Komro, Flay, & Biglan, 2011). Mindfulness practice has been suggested as one way to proactively cultivate health and well-being, thereby alleviating stress and anxiety (Beauchemin, Hutchins, & Patterson, 2008; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Gould, Dariotis, Mendelson, & Greenberg, 2012; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005; Sibinga et al., 2011) and counteracting the negative effects of childhood poverty on physical and mental health.

In this paper, we provide a case study of one high-poverty elementary school's efforts to integrate regular mindfulness practices across all K-5 classrooms. We describe the process of implementation and explore what we have come to understand through teacher and administrator interviews and classroom observations have been the effects of a community-driven school-based mindfulness practice on students' well-being and engagement in learning. In the paragraphs below, preceding a discussion of the study's methodology, we sketch the accelerating landscape of research on school-based mindfulness, placing emphasis on recent studies that report on the influence of these practices for student health, well-being, and engagement in learning. We then describe the case study's methodology before transitioning to our findings and a discussion of the implications of this work.

The groundswell of interest in the study of school-based mindfulness (Feagans Gould, Dariotis, Greenberg, & Mendelson, 2016; Felver, Celis-de Hoyos, Tezanos, & Singh, 2016; Rempel, 2012) is testimony to the need for work focused on fostering health and well-being in education. Recent research suggests that practicing mindfulness can assist students in taking control of their behavior and learning by developing their self-awareness and strengthening their self-regulatory skills (e.g., Felver et al., 2016). Specifically, students who participate in mindfulness interventions show reductions in stress and anxiety levels and improvements in emotional regulation (Beauchemin et al., 2008; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Gould et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2005; Sibinga et al., 2011). Practicing mindfulness can also promote students' development of social skills and empathy (Beauchemin et al., 2008; Black & Fernando, 2013; Schonert-Reichl et al., 2015). Recent research also shows that mindfulness practice can affect student academic achievement (Bakosh, Snow, Tobias, Houlihan, & Barbosa-Leiker, 2016; Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, & Davidson 2013; Singh et al., 2016) and executive functioning (Flook et al., 2010). Taken together, evidence that school-based mindfulness practices have the ability to influence self-regulation, reduce student stress and anxiety, assist in the development of pro-social skills, and promote academic achievement has fueled (a) the study of mindfulness' effects for student health and well-being and (b) the techniques and with which populations of children and youth these techniques are viewed as most advantageous (Rempel, 2012).

While previous studies have reported that practicing mindfulness has positive effects on student health and well-being, our study is distinctive because it also documents the organic implementation of a community-driven school-based mindfulness practice. Specifically, our study illustrates how a diverse,

high poverty, urban elementary school community in the Northeastern United States implemented a school-wide mindfulness practice. The following research questions guided this study: How and why did George Washington Elementary School (GWE; a pseudonym) implement a school-wide mindfulness initiative, and what were the perceived effects of the initiative on student well-being and learning?

## Methodology

Our research was initiated when a staff member at a local center promoting mindful learning, the Center for Mindful Learning (CML), contacted our research team to discern interest in investigating their work in a local community and school district. While the larger CML project involved supporting a city-wide approach of advancing mindfulness practices across the community, our research team decided that the first stage in the research project would be to document CML’s initial work in the city’s elementary school, which was the precursor to the city-wide focus on mindfulness training. In keeping with CML’s collaborative approach, we designed a community-based descriptive case study using a holistic single-case design (Yin, 2009) to document the implementation of mindfulness practice at GWE. Holistic single-case design case study is appropriate for a case study with a single unit of analysis (Yin, 2009); in this case, the unit of analysis was the elementary school. Our research team consisted of six faculty members in a college of education and social services and two undergraduate students. This research was our team’s first exposure to the school’s mindfulness initiative.

### Data Collection

Data collection consisted of three data gathering techniques: semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document review. All participants granted informed consent prior to interviews and observations.

**Interviews.** We utilized a semi-structured protocol to elicit the story of mindfulness practice at GWE from each interviewee’s perspective (Patton, 2015). Most questions were open-ended (e.g., “Tell us about when you started using mindfulness practice in your teaching and why”), though some were geared towards more specific information (e.g., “How many years have you been teaching?”). We used follow-up probes to draw out more information as participants spoke (Yin, 2011). Interviews with educators lasted 30 minutes each while interviews with other participants lasted between one and two hours. Eighty-five percent of all interviews were conducted by two researchers, while the remaining 15% were conducted by one researcher. Each researcher completed analytic memos (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014) immediately following the interviews, which included questions about the salient aspects of the interview, surprising information, and follow-up questions for future interviews.

We employed purposeful sampling (Patton, 2015) to identify all teachers and other school and community members who were considered key players in the school mindfulness initiative. The interviewees included the school’s principal, two parents who were instrumental in bringing mindfulness practice to GWE, 20 educators at GWE (representing 90% of classroom teachers, one special

educator, and the guidance counselor), CML staff, the school district's Wellness Coordinator, and the Superintendent of the district.

**Classroom observations.** We also conducted observations of 19 (out of 21, or 90%) classrooms as they implemented their structured mindfulness practice. In some cases, observations included classroom activities conducted immediately before and after mindfulness practice. Observations ranged from 15 to 35 minutes and were conducted by one (n=14) or two (n=5) researchers. During these observations and immediately following them, we took notes on the objects being used in mindfulness practice (e.g., cushions, chimes), what we noticed about the organization of space and time, and how student and teacher bodies were acting and interacting in the classroom environment (Bresler, 2004). After each observation, the team of observers met to discuss what they heard, saw, and sensed in the classroom spaces and to list follow-up questions to be asked at subsequent interviews.

**Document review.** We collected and reviewed a wide variety of relevant documents as part of the case study in order to triangulate the data (Patton, 2015). These included numerous websites, newsletters, online materials (including the CML training program), and other school materials related to understanding the history and current status of mindfulness practice at GWE.

## Data Analysis

We employed a constant-comparative (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) method of data analysis, meaning that we formed questions for subsequent interviews and observations while we wrote and discussed our analytic memos from the interviews, observations, and documents. After removing identifying information from transcripts and checking them for accuracy, at least three researchers read and open-coded (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) the first 22 transcripts using Microsoft Word. The first author was one of the readers and coders of all transcripts. We then met to discuss these first-cycle codes (Miles et al., 2014) and discern primary codes that categorized all the codes. We entered the interview transcripts into Dedoose, an online qualitative analysis software program that enables collaborative coding, and two authors coded all transcripts for the parent codes. Next, we came up with sub-codes from the data sorted into primary codes and discussed the definitions of these codes: a process which established the trustworthiness of the codes and collaborative coding process (Noble & Smith, 2015). To check the credibility of these themes, we confirmed them with subsequent interviewees as a form of member checking (Patton, 2015). After the initial round of interviews, observations, and coding, we also shared the main themes with the school principal and two additional key informants, the Wellness Coordinator and the Superintendent, whom we had not yet interviewed. These three participants corroborated the themes that had emerged, provided more data to support them, and offered new data that added greater depth to the case study.

## Findings

In this section, we present the history of mindfulness practice at GWE and the current practice as observed by our research team and described by participants. We then focus on conditions necessary for successful practice and detail the effects of mindfulness practice on student well-being. Those effects include the ability to identify and discuss emotions and needs, choose strategies to self-regulate and sustain engagement, use mindfulness practice outside of school, and exhibit increased self-awareness.

### School Context

GWE serves approximately 400 PreK through fifth grade students. Situated in an otherwise culturally and racially homogenous state in the northeastern United States, the student population at GWE is quite diverse due to the community’s status as a refugee resettlement area, with 31 languages spoken and 26 nationalities represented. Approximately 75% of students qualify for free or reduced-priced meals, 18% have an Individual Education Plan, and about 35% of students receive English as a second language services. In 2013, the school did not achieve the AYP indicators under NCLB for reading and mathematics.

### Crafting a School-Wide Commitment to Mindfulness: Attending to Focused Relaxation

According to the principal, the 2012 school year was “a horrendous year; one that you just block out for the rest of your life so that you can move forward.” She reported that issues with student behavior built up and led to student and teacher frustration and burnout. These behavior issues were “tipping the balance of the whole building,” and school personnel were at a loss regarding how to get things back on track. Recognizing the need for change due to teacher burnout and student behavior, the principal met with the school leadership team in 2013 to address the acknowledged problem of student behavior.

Meanwhile, two parents—one a special educator who teaches in a different district; the other, a Pilates and yoga instructor—advocated for a change based on what they had witnessed in their own children’s classrooms. These parents volunteered their time to teach mindfulness, meditation, and yoga to students in any class while also talking with the principal about positive behavior supports, social thinking curricula focused on developing social competencies related to behavior, and the importance of common language. Some teachers accepted these parents’ offer to practice mindfulness and yoga in their classrooms.

Witnessing increased self-awareness among students participating in these informal mindfulness practices, the school principal encouraged more widespread use of mindfulness and yoga practices in the classroom. The principal worked to increase the consistency of language used to discuss behavior by implementing the social thinking curriculum, *SuperFlex*, designed to help students adjust their behavior in order to lead more meaningful, happier lives (Madrigal & Winner, 2008). While this was helpful, the principal, in conversations with her leadership team and other staff, did not feel that it was sufficient to address the needs of teachers and students.

At the start of the summer of 2013, the leadership team decided to adopt the CML online mindfulness program, a program designed to introduce mindfulness across multiple classrooms, because it could be implemented without extensive teacher training. CML trained seven interested teachers and school leaders to use their online program over the course of two professional development days. All teachers were required to attend one hour of the training, during which CML staff led a mindfulness activity for school personnel and explained how the program worked in classrooms. After this school-wide training, seven additional teachers decided to participate and were given access to the online program. By the end of the first year, all teachers asked for and were given access to the CML site.

While some teachers originally conceived the two as separate initiatives, the principal and other adopters fostered the understanding that social thinking was the overarching “umbrella” of behavior appropriate for social situations (including school) with mindfulness strategies (e.g., deep breathing, counting to ten, turtle time, taking a walk) as “specific tools” within the bigger umbrella. The school leadership team hoped that aligning these complementary initiatives would provide students and teachers with a coherent, transparent, and adaptive curriculum focused on improving self-awareness and self-regulation in relation to the broader classroom and school community.

According to teachers’ self-report of their usage of the online program when mindfulness practice was first introduced in 2013, 75% of teachers participating in any form of mindfulness (14 teachers) were exclusively using the online program. The online program centered on the concept of practicing focused relaxation. Over the following two years, however, teachers grew increasingly comfortable with the program and broadened their understanding of mindfulness, which resulted in many teachers branching out on their own and adapting the curriculum to suit their teaching style. At the time of data collection (2015), the majority of participants used focused relaxation, the fundamental tenet behind the online program, as their framework while they crafted their own activities for mindfulness practice. In fact, at the time of data collection, 45% of teachers reported using their own practices at least 50% of the time, 35% of teachers reported using an entirely independent mindfulness curriculum, and the remaining 20% reported using only CML’s online program. Our observations of the classrooms revealed that mindfulness practices looked quite different, depending on teachers’ reliance on CML’s online program compared to practices that took a more independent approach. Across the school, mindfulness practice ranged from student-led deep breathing exercises to online-led visualization stories to Zumba routines and yoga poses.

For example, in a fourth grade classroom where the teacher relied solely on the CML program, students began mindfulness practice sitting at their desks in a darkened room, facing an interactive whiteboard displaying a simple drawing of a tree. The student leader for the day started the three-minute program by clicking on the arrow. Students were guided by a male voice through an eyes-closed visualization scenario. The teacher sat in the back of the room monitoring student behavior and partially participating (with open eyes) in the mindfulness exercise. Some students closed their eyes and seemed to participate in the activity, but others did not close their eyes or engage in the deep breathing activity. At the end of the program, a student leader was prompted by the program to answer (on the interactive whiteboard) three questions centered on their ability to focus and remain mindful during the program.

On the other end of the continuum, in a classroom where the teacher no longer used the CML online program, the mindfulness practice looked markedly different. Students eagerly formed a circle on the rug in a quiet, dimly lit corner of the room to begin their mindfulness practice. The classroom teacher, enthusiastic yet serene, pulled out a large jar filled with water and colored glitter. She then asked students, “What is a worry you want to release from your mind today?” The teacher explained that the glitter in this jar represented the class’ worries, troubles, and negative feelings. After the teacher shook the jar, the glitter settled to the bottom, representing the release of these stressful emotions. Simultaneously, students as well as their teacher closed their eyes while deeply breathing in and out. The teacher then led students in a discussion about ways they could calm down and let go of negative feelings as they emerge; the last few sparkles settled to the bottom of the jar. Students excitedly offered answers such as, “I close my eyes and breathe in and out very slowly.” This particular session ended by making the sound of “om” together as a class before the students’ transition to their lunch period.

While there was generally a scheduled time for mindfulness practice in each class, the practice of being mindful was often reinforced throughout the school day during situations where mindfulness could be particularly beneficial (e.g., impulsive reactionary behavior). Regarding classroom environment, many classrooms were furnished with materials to facilitate mindfulness (e.g., a peace corner with coloring books and utensils, chimes, and bells; a dedicated computer to access mindfulness practice sites).

Teachers reported different schedules for structured mindfulness practice in their classrooms. Just over two-thirds of the teachers reported structuring the mindful practice at a particular time of day, including the beginning of the day, prior to math class, or before/after recess. The remaining teachers reported practicing mindfulness at different times throughout the week and adjusting the time according to students’ needs, as one teacher explained:

... I just felt like my class needed that time together – that togetherness feeling that mindfulness creates before recess... that talk of empathy comes out, that talk of being mindful of what’s going on around you at recess, to try to help some of those recess behaviors...

### **Mindfulness Practice’s Effects on Student Well-Being**

Participants described numerous benefits of school-wide mindfulness practices on students’ health and well-being. Overall, participants reported that once students appreciated the importance of practicing mindfulness, positive effects included increased self-awareness and increased ability to identify and discuss emotions and needs, choose strategies to self-regulate and sustain engagement, and use mindfulness practice outside of school.

**Conditions for practice.** Participants reported that practicing mindfulness made more of an impact on students’ well-being when certain conditions were met.

First, participants reported that it takes time to learn to use mindfulness. The guidance counselor, who works with classrooms on a rotating schedule, for instance, commented:

The kids where they haven't practiced it... It's kind of a silly time. It's uncomfortable to... know that other people are sitting quietly around you and that you're sharing a space but you're not talking. That seems weird for a lot of kids so I can tell for sure if a kid has been practicing it or not.

Participants also spoke about the importance of practicing mindfulness proactively, when students are not in an elevated state. The principal stated that she and teachers have discussed "that [students] practice all these strategies when it's not a high-stress time so then they can access these strategies during a high-stress time." A teacher addressed the importance of practicing when not in an elevated state, claiming it helped the students build "muscle memory. The more they practiced together... when I would say, 'How about you take a deep breath right now and see if that helps?' they knew what that meant, and it wasn't just me saying RELAX." In addition to practicing proactively, participants recognized the importance of establishing a routine and norms around mindfulness practice.

Not surprisingly, regular and proactive mindfulness practice was seen as most helpful for those students who "bought in." Still, for those students who were not certain that the practice would help them or did not see the need for help, participants spoke of different engagement strategies that they used with persistence to expand meaningful participation. It was interesting for us to find that participants did not have any common descriptors for students who participated avidly and those who did not, suggesting that teachers and administrators were able to suspend judgment about what engagement in mindful activity meant or looked like for individual students. One participant, for instance, mentioned that she was surprised to see "really big, tough, macho guys... sit down and just shut their eyes and breathe. It's really neat," while another described that "one [student who] is considered non-English—she knows about maybe 12 words of English—can lead us in the breathing."

We found that conditions for school-based mindfulness practice in as diverse and inclusive of a place as GWE require the availability and flexibility of various tools and techniques. Teachers adjusted their motivating techniques since each class had different levels of participation. One teacher explained:

And that class last year was just so like... 18 sponges ready to take it in. This year I've got a different demeanor in the room... At the beginning of the year, it was unfortunate but I almost had to bribe them a little bit to buy into it... But the classrooms are so utterly just imbalanced as far as personalities and dynamics and stuff that kids were just like, quiet time and having their head down felt very nerve wracking. So I've noticed a change in that over the course of the year where kids are like, "Cool, time to put my head down." Like, "I can do this."

This teacher found that once students became accustomed to mindfulness practice, they "bought in" and benefitted from it. Some teachers underscored the importance of validating students' choice to be involved or not to be involved, which in itself underscores the quality of nonjudgmental practice and promotes self-regulation and buy-in.

**Benefits of practice.** Participants attributed practicing mindfulness with numerous benefits to the students' well-being and engagement in learning. The benefits included increased self-awareness, awareness of others, self-regulation, communication about states of mind and needs, and use of strategies outside of the classroom.

One of the benefits widely acknowledged by participants was students’ increased ability to identify and articulate *their* needs through greater self-awareness. Students’ ability to think about what is happening in their own bodies is critical to them being able to deal with their needs appropriately:

So they come back from that wild and chaotic time [the lunchroom] and they’re so unaware of themselves in that space because there’s so much going on... It’s over stimulating... And that’s what I try to get them to do: focus on whether or not you are feeling relaxed...

Participants recognized that this self-awareness enabled students to attune to signs from their body independently of teachers; as one participant noted:

Particularly in 4th grade, it seems important for them to start becoming aware of when they’re feeling tense, when they’re feeling whatever [because] they’re starting to get to a place in their educational life where adults are not going to be policing them as often, and it’s really important to be able to know yourself and know when you’re feeling tense, know when you’re feeling calm... so that you can deal with it appropriately.

As students became accustomed to identifying their needs, they could select and execute strategies to regulate their thoughts and behavior accordingly: “It’s not just an adult saying ‘that’s unexpected, that you’re making a weird noise right now’... Instead, someone might say to himself, ‘Why am I making the weird noise? I’m feeling anxious, okay, now I need to pick a strategy.’” One participant explained that when students are upset or struggling, they are able to identify strategies they can employ to self-regulate: “I can listen to my breath, I can do a belly breath, I can do a palm press, I can listen to the noises in the room. So they’ve got this big toolbox now that they’ve practiced,”

Importantly, we found that participants discussed how, once their students practice mindfulness, teachers were less involved in helping students regulate their behavior and emotions: “they’re in charge of their selves more, on how to get calmed down. And it also really helps them with how much attention they can spend and how long they can spend at something when they’re learning.” One teacher explained how students had “‘glass man moments’ where they had really big reactions to small problems” in the past. She continued: “So, by using the mindfulness and having that practice every day...they were able to call upon those strategies that they used during the different time of the day when they were having a big reaction.” In other words, students who struggled with learning self-awareness skills benefited when teachers modified their mindfulness practice and provided additional supports that helped students engage with them.

In addition to increased self-awareness, participants reported that the school-wide initiative helped students talk about their needs and strategies using “the terminology—oh, we need to be mindful right now.” This terminology included language from the SuperFlex curriculum (e.g., “Glass Man,” “Mean Jean,” “Rock Brain”), which participants wove together with the names of mindfulness strategies and somatic symptoms. One teacher explained:

[Mean Jean] is from Social Thinking. She’s just a gal who’s really mean. She could go off and say, “I just hate you. I just hate your sweater,” or something like that. And she gets in that mode and I

say, “what do you think you can do to get out of that mode?” “Well, I could blow like the wind and just sit and think. I could blow out the candles. I could starfish breathe. I could palm press.”

Students verbalize aloud what they are doing using this terminology through self-talk (“Oh, okay, I’m going to take a deep breath”) which, according to participants, helps them and other students utilize those strategies. Using self-talk is especially powerful for younger students, as explained by one teacher:

It’s a lot harder for [first graders] to say it in their head than it is to say it out loud. So we practice that a lot... And we do a lot of just quick turn to your neighbor and say, “you did a great job” or turn to your neighbor and say, “I can do this.” I mean something like that is so simple but it’s been really positive and is changing the community in my classroom to be able to be a positive place of teamwork where mistakes are okay, where that environment of learning is a positive and supportive place.

Many participants also described students’ ability to be more aware of their reactions to other people’s behavior as an important aspect of improved self-awareness. Identifying what was bothering them and using mindfulness strategies alleviated negative behavior by shifting the perceived locus of tension and stress from being purely internal to acknowledging external triggers and therefore mindfully responding to others behaviors. One teacher shared an example of this:

A student shared with me that ‘so-and-so bumped into me and I took a couple of deep breaths and I was able to walk away, have fun and not push them back.’ Wow, that’s amazing. Like you felt the urge to push someone and you took some deep breaths and you chose not to? (Interview 9).

Another teacher noticed that, when there were outbursts in the classroom, because the students had learned how to relax in times of stress and trust that they would be safe, “...the kids are able to stay focused on what they’re doing and get their work done. They [think] (teacher) will take care of this, we just need to be and just relax.”

The benefits were not simply related to inter- and intra-personal skills. Participants also indicated how increased self-awareness affected students’ (and teachers’) ability to see the connection between personal health, well-being, and intellectual acumen, namely through increasing student metacognition of their learning strategies and needs. One teacher shared, “They know they’re supposed to be thinking about how their brain works and what [their] brain is figuring out, and I think mindfulness just goes hand in hand with that. It’s understanding how your brain works.” This metacognition manifested itself during and before many high-pressure activities, including the standardized tests:

I saw kids with S-BAC [statewide testing] turn—we call it *Apples Up* because they put their [Apple computer] screen down—and just putting their head down for a few minutes... Or, I watched a kid last year turn his test over, put his pencil down and just sit there like this. And then a minute or two later, he picked up his pencil, he opened it back up and he kept going.

Participants also spoke about how students with significant anxiety benefitted from practicing mindfulness. One teacher explained:

He would scream and – I mean high-pitched screams, run around the room, throw things, destroy... now I will notice him at times when he’s getting a little bit anxious or upset about something, that he will just take a deep breath and he’ll... [deep breath] close his eyes.

Others told us about the effects on students’ well-being outside of school. One teacher summarized the importance of transferring mindfulness practice to home life: “A lot of them go home to some really stressful situations... They can’t control the situation out there... Our own anchors help to work within traumatic situations... It gives them hope.” Another teacher explained how she would ask students about how they used mindfulness over the weekend. She recounted how one student answered: “Well, my sister was hitting me with a book and I took a deep breath and then I went in and asked my mom for some help.” Mindfulness supported interpersonal relationships, and supported students experiencing stress, including very high-risk, anxiety-producing situations. One participant shared this story of a student who was able to use mindfulness skills learned at school to self-regulate when his apartment went up in flames:

The family lost everything... In the past, he has been somewhat a little challenging, but he bought into it [mindfulness practice] right away. And he shared with the group at one point – he was like, when I was standing there watching my apartment go up in flames – because he came home to it – I didn’t know where my mother and sister were and there was part of me that wondered if they were still inside. And he said, “All I could hear was fire engines, people yelling, like just chaos and everything. And I kind of closed my eyes and paid attention to all the sounds and I was breathing in and breathing out and I opened my eyes and, a few moments later, off the sidewalk come my mom and my sister.” That was like my powerful one that the whole class was like – whoa.

Some teachers reported communicating clearly with their students’ families about mindfulness practice in the classroom. A kindergarten teacher explained how she and her colleagues communicated with families:

And what we do is we have a kindergarten newsletter and it goes out and we donate one square about being mindful. What we’re doing this month in mindfulness, we’re learning to relax, we’re learning to stay relaxed within our brain. In this lesson, we’re learning to look for sounds; we’re learning to hear the world around us. Every time that we do something different, we put it in the block and we tell parents a key idea of practice – to do some practice at home. So we’re sending it home, too. And parents are really using it.

In addition to this formal communication, participants reported that parents were surprised to see their children using mindfulness at home and shared stories with teachers during parent/teacher conferences and other events. One mother was a little baffled by her son’s use of mindfulness at home; the mother told the teacher that her son:

was really, really mad at his sister. He stormed out of the room. And I walked in his room and he was in his bed and he was just – he had his head really low and he was taking really deep breaths. I said, (Student) “are you all right?” He goes, “Yeah, I’m just breathing, mom. I’m just breathing.” It’s so great. It’s just – it’s so powerful that these kids are living in some pretty bad situations, that they have something that they can get control over their own presence, their own being, that’s really positive for them. And they’re experiencing it here and that whole connection.

And now mom has those tools too of saying “oh, (Student) this would be a really good time to just take a break. Oh yeah, okay.” And they have a little place [...] this take-a-break place. But it just gives the parents some tools, too.

## Discussion

Our study illustrates how one diverse urban elementary school implemented a school-wide mindfulness practice and its effects on student health and well-being. Participants expressed that practicing mindfulness increased students’ self-awareness, which helped them articulate their emotions and needs, often using commonly known language from the social thinking curriculum in place at GWE. Once able to identify their needs, students were able to choose from strategies they had learned through their proactive practice to self-regulate. Students were also able to control their reactionary behavior as well as focus on strategies to engage in their learning. Participants also expressed that many students had been using mindfulness strategies outside of school.

While there are numerous studies that show that practicing mindfulness has positive effects on student outcomes, this study is unique in that it describes the organic process of a community-driven and school-wide implementation of mindfulness practice, resulting in adoption of mindfulness as a central, unifying practice. An interesting finding is that participants’ thorough integration of the social thinking curriculum with their mindfulness practices productively bolstered the possibility for developing a more salient set of tools, including common language to be used for communicating both within and across the school and broader community. In addition, teachers used an online mindfulness program when starting their practice but, as they became more confident in their understanding of mindfulness practice, shifted to using other mindfulness-promoting activities. Mindfulness practice occurred regularly in the classrooms, but teachers, being mindful of their students’ needs, introduced flexibility in the timing and nature of the practice in order to ensure its utility and success.

While this case study is not meant to be generalizable, we strove to include enough detail for readers to relate the findings to their own settings (Patton, 2015). The family- and community-driven mindfulness initiative studied serves as an innovative case study example for supporting health and well-being for students, especially those who attend high poverty elementary schools. Specifically, the study provides some direction for school administrators and educators hoping to increase student well-being through improved social emotional learning, engagement in learning, and school climate. First, a unique feature of GWE’s implementation of mindfulness practices was the intentional blending of a social thinking curriculum with the more holistic approach offered through mindfulness practice, resulting in an alignment of initiatives and the potential for an integrated approach to change. This appears in contrast with initiatives focused only on curricular change or mindfulness. Future research might explore this blended approach in greater detail to further articulate its potential to expand students’ growth and well-being. Second, implementation of mindfulness practices at GWE occurred through both a “top-down” and “bottom-up” approach to implementation that appeared to contribute to its success. The principal offered strong support of the initiative and provided opportunities for professional development; at the

same time, she and the leadership team encouraged a flexible approach to implementation that resulted in a high level of adoption. Related to this, adoption of mindfulness practices at GWE came about in large part because of the leadership team’s willingness to embrace family input and innovation, as well as larger support offered through the community as a whole. This holistic and community-focused approach to implementation is one that may be particularly important in a high-poverty community experiencing rapid social change. Finally, each of these implications should be of interest to educator preparation faculty who seek to prepare the next generation of teachers and administrators to creatively collaborate with community partners to ensure student well-being.

## Conclusion

Health and learning are inextricably linked, and educational approaches aimed at fostering social, emotional, and academic growth within schools, communities, and families can improve student well-being (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Lewallen et al., 2015; Richards, 2012). Especially in high-poverty schools, proactive approaches like the organic community-driven mindfulness implementation described in this article are critical to cultivating health and well-being, alleviating stress and anxiety (Beauchemin et al., 2008; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Gould et al., 2012; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Napoli et al., 2005; Sibinga et al., 2011), and counteracting the negative effects of childhood poverty on physical and mental health.

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# **Picturing (as) Resistance: Studying Resistance and Well-Being of Indigenous Girls and Young Women in Addressing Sexual Violence**

Claudia Mitchell and Maria Ezcurra

## **Abstract**

The health and well-being of young people remains a critical issue. For Indigenous girls and young women in Canada and South Africa, the situation is exacerbated by high rates of sexual violence. The article draws on examples of artworks and close readings of several images of resistance produced by Indigenous girls and young women participating in a six-year study that seeks to address sexual violence in the two countries. Exploring resistance is an understudied area in relation to young people and well-being. Building on our visual research and fieldwork, we posit that the idea of “picturing (as) resistance” through the various participatory visual and arts-based tools is a promising area of investigation in relation to well-being.

## **Picturing (as) Resistance: Studying Resistance and Well-Being of Indigenous Girls and Young Women in Addressing Sexual Violence**

“What would it really mean to study the world from the standpoint of adolescence both as knowers and as actors?” Ann Oakley (1994, p. 23).

Oakley’s question is an important one for framing and reframing research to take account of the perspectives of young people in matters that are of importance to them. Her question is a particularly relevant one in the context of mental health and well-being. We know that one in five young people has mental health issues, and that matters of age, gender, race, class, disability, sexuality, and cultural and historical contexts are all pertinent (Crivello, Camfield, & Woodhead, 2009). For example, according to the Native Women’s Association of Canada,<sup>1</sup> Canadian Indigenous girls are three times more likely than non-Indigenous girls to experience violence. Oakley’s question provides the foundation for a six-year study working with Indigenous girls and young women in two country contexts, Canada and South Africa. In the project, as we explore in this article, Indigenous girls and young women from school and community sites across the two countries have been engaged in participatory arts-based approaches to addressing sexual violence. A question that is particularly pertinent as the project evolves is the idea of health and well-being itself and the ways in which engagement and empowerment could contribute to strengthening well-being. Considering the investment of time of the participants and the very sensitive nature of the workshops, we want to question in an explicit way what we are learning about well-being in the context of participatory approaches to addressing sexual violence, and how participatory visual research might contribute to deepening an understanding of youth participation and well-being more

broadly. What frameworks are appropriate for exploring young people's participation in relation to well-being? What are some of the implications for school-based and community programs? We position the article as one of "picturing resistance" as a way to improve the perception of what well-being could look like for girls and young women in two country contexts where, as we explore below, the situation for Indigenous girls and young women in relation to sexual violence is similar. Our article is conceptual in orientation and, as such, seeks to deepen an understanding of what the image-making experience and the images themselves might mean in the context of well-being.

### **Learning Across Countries**

We start by looking at some of the contextual factors for learning across the two country contexts. There are dramatic contradictions between the constitutional and legal frameworks and the everyday realities for marginalized populations of girls and young women. In many ways, Canada and South Africa have a shared history in relation to racialized colonization and segregation, something that is evident in the treatment of Indigenous populations in Canada, and in the effects of apartheid in South Africa. While the governments of Canada and South Africa have attempted to confront past injustices through the establishment of Truth and Reconciliation Commissions,<sup>2</sup> both countries have continued to come under scrutiny by international organizations such as Human Rights Watch<sup>3</sup> and the United Nations<sup>4</sup> for their failure to create safe and secure environments for girls and young women.

With the launch of an Independent National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG) in 2016, the Canadian government has committed to examining the systemic causes of all forms of violence against Indigenous women and girls in Canada and to finding ways of preventing violence. According to the National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls website,<sup>5</sup> Indigenous women and girls face the highest poverty and violence rates in Canada, where hundreds have gone missing or have been murdered during the last 30 years. The National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls affirms that it has given its commissioners the authority to conduct the National Inquiry autonomously, acknowledging the emotional well-being of those who have lost a daughter, sister, or mother. As a *Globe and Mail* article highlights, to acknowledge and honour the lives of the hundreds of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada, the judicial system must implement immediate actions, considering the well-being of the Indigenous women and girls and their families and communities (Eaglewoman, 2016).

There is a big difference between the social and economic well-being of non-Indigenous populations and Indigenous communities, whose conditions are compared to those in developing countries (Carli, 2012). Colonization had a negative impact on the well-being of Indigenous communities in Canada, affecting principally Indigenous women, who face gendered racism, sexism, poverty, single motherhood, a lack of educational achievement and employment opportunities. The gender-based violence many Indigenous women experience in their homes, their communities, and Canada in general, has had an impact on their cultural identities and influenced also their access to health and personal well-being (Bourassa, McKay-McNabb, & Hampton, 2004; Halseth, 2013). These forms of violence can also be linked to the legacy of the residential school system. Many Indigenous women endure the prolongation

of a structure in which abuse and violence are the “norm,” lacking the necessary support from the justice system, male chiefs and council members, and society at large (Halseth, 2013).

South Africa, for its part, launched the National Council Against Gender Based Violence to respond to the dire situation for girls.<sup>6</sup> South Africa has one of the highest rates of sexual assault in the world, and while absolute numbers are unreliable because of underreporting, adolescent girls between the ages of 12 and 17 are particularly at risk. As Banwari (2011) notes, in 2000, of the over 52,550 cases of rape or attempted rape of girls and women reported to the South African Police Service, 21,438 were under the age of 18 years (with 7,898 of these under 12 years). Confounding the underreporting of sexual assault is the fact that rates of prosecution are low; a 2005 study indicates that fewer than 1% of cases actually result in a conviction. There is a consistent (and unrelenting) possibility of sexual violence that runs counter to girls’ safety and security in schools and communities, and to their reproductive health, particularly in the context of HIV and AIDS (Moletsane, Mitchell, & Lewin, 2015). While South Africa has made major strides in enrolling girls in primary education, one of the most pervasive reasons for the poor participation and low success of girls in the schooling system is gender inequality, and, in particular, its manifestations of violence against girls and women, and related health issues (most notably HIV infections and compromised reproductive health). In the case of rural South Africa, poverty, traditional leadership, geographic isolation, and legal and cultural frameworks intersect in the regulation of the lives of girls and women. Moletsane (2011) highlights the idea that, “so-called cultural practices” (p. 89), particularly in relation to performing sexualities, typically intersect in ways that place girls as the lowest of the low as far as having control over their bodies is concerned and this is further complicated by the high and gendered incidence of HIV and AIDS. Motsemme (2007) comments on the effects of the physical uprooting that characterizes the lives of rural and township girls and notes that, “uprootedness as a form of physical and spiritual violence is an aspect which surprisingly continues to receive scant attention in South African social studies” (p. 373).

### **Young People, Mental Health and Well-Being and Arts-Based Interventions: A Brief Overview**

Looking at the situation for Indigenous girls and young women, we see the idea of well-being as a critical one. We acknowledge the broad range of mental health and well-being concerns experienced by young people, ranging from substance abuse, eating disorders, bullying, sexual identity, and issues of migration, to name only some, as stated in The Chief Public Health Officer’s Report on the State of Public Health in Canada, 2011.<sup>7</sup> We also acknowledge the challenges for educators and health professionals to find solutions to problems that seldom exist as single issues as we see in the critical work in the area of resilience (Theron, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015) and flourishing (Seligman, 2011). We situate our work on the growing body of participatory research with young people related to issues of health as we see in the studies by Brown, Shoveller, Chabot, and LaMontagne (2013) and Didkowsky, Ungar, and Liebenberg (2010) on risk health and well-being. The participatory visual work of MacDonald et al. (2015) on resilience in work with Indigenous youth in Rigolet, and Flicker et al. (in press; 2013) with Indigenous young people has taken on a “stay native and stay healthy” approach that also helps to frame

how might we look at participatory visual research in relation to the health and well-being of young people, and in particular, what it might mean for young people's actual participation.

Aside from these studies there are, to date, few studies within participatory visual research with young people that explore issues of well-being even though there is often an implicit sense that notions of participation and working with the visual through media production are inherently good (for the participants). Terms such as "voice," "agency," and "empowerment" are used in relation to participatory visual work (see Clover, 2011; Crivello et al. 2009; MacDonald et al., 2015; Mand, 2012; Moletsane, Mitchell, & Lewin, 2010; Moletsane et al., 2015), and there is an increasing recognition that young people are by themselves choosing to represent their perspectives on such critical social matters as feminism, violence, and environmental issues. Some of this work can be seen in youth-led social movements, such as *Idle No More* amongst Indigenous young people in a Canadian context, while other examples, as Caron, Raby, Mitchell, Théwissen-Leblanc, and Prioletta, (2016) highlight, can be found in the work of individual youth whose productions reach many other young people through 'social change oriented' vlogs and other forms of social media.

An important area of inquiry that draws together much of the participatory work with young people concerns the ways in which youth-focused methods can be decolonizing in and of themselves through the use of participatory digital and other arts-based methods. Participatory interventions are typically part of community-based research, drawing on audio, visual, and performance-based research methods, such as Gonick's (2016) work in film with Inuit girls in Iqaluit; Flicker and Danforth's (2012) work with digital storytelling with Indigenous youth; Liebenberg's (2009a) work with participatory video with Indigenous youth in Happy Valley, Goose Bay; De Lange, Mitchell, and Moletsane's (2015) work with rural South African girls and the use of cellphilms; Mitchell's work with drawing and mapping involving girls in Kenya and Rwanda, and the extensive work with youth in the area of PhotoVoice in Ethiopia, Swaziland, and South Africa (Mitchell, 2009, 2011a, 2011b, 2012; Moletsane et al., 2007), all point to the ways in which these various narrative modes build on storytelling conventions of communities and, as such, have the potential to both subvert some of the researcher-researched power dimensions, and contribute to a milieu where the perspectives of young people are recognized.

The idea of participatory interventions to address critical social justice issues, such as violence prevention, is framed within a rich body of work housed in research areas such as community based research, media and participatory cultures research, and participatory visual methodologies studies. Applied to youth, this work typically draws on visual and performance-based research methods such as PhotoVoice, participatory video, drawing and map making, digital storytelling, theatre performance, radio production, podcasts, and collage (see Clacherty, 2005; Denov, Doucet, & Kamara, 2012; Gubrium, 2009; Liebenberg, 2009a, 2009b; Malone, 2008; Mitchell, 2011a, 2011b; Moletsane, Mitchell, Smith, & Chisholm, 2008). This use of digital and social media in this work has looked at the ways in which young people themselves are "knowledge producers" (Stuart & Mitchell, 2013) in relation to issues that are critical to their everyday lives (Bloustien, 2003; Buckingham, 2003, 2007; Carrington & Robinson, 2009; De Castell & Jenson, 2003; Jenkins, 2006; Mallan, 2009; Morrison, 2010; Poletti, 2008).

Following from the work of Buckingham and Sefton-Green (1994), the focus of this research is typically on youth producing the messages that come out of their own experiences, but which then become the “entry point” for further work in terms of critique and taking action. As Leach and Mitchell highlight in their 2006 book, *Combating Gender Violence In and Around Schools*, interventions that are particularly promising are those that draw on the engagement of young people themselves. Mitchell, Walsh, and Moletsane (2006), for example, describe a number of arts-based interventions where young people draw, work with photos, or produce videos that document their everyday realities. In more recent studies, Mitchell (2011a, 2011b) highlights work with participatory video with youth in rural KwaZulu-Natal and the various ways in which the resulting videos produced by young people can be used. First, they serve as graphic local evidence of gender violence. Second, they also serve as pedagogical tools for discussion and, as such, are part of an intervention in and of themselves (Mitchell, 2012).

### **Studying Resistance and Well-Being Through the Arts**

In proposing the idea of connecting resistance and activism to well-being in working with girls and young women to address sexual violence, we have been inspired by powerful examples of the ways in which artistic expression and media-making at a national level in both Canada and South Africa are contributing to advocacy on addressing issues of social justice. There are several examples of community art projects that function as a healing agent during difficult times.<sup>8</sup> These projects can change the way in which the artists, the participants, or the community perceive their reality and relate to it within their context, improving their wellness. More than a decade ago Marilyn Martin (2003) asked the question, “HIV/AIDS in South Africa: Can the Visual Arts Make a Difference?” Her question was a critical one in relation to highlighting the ways in which art can both inspire, as well as contribute to, a collective sense of working together. Creative processes are recognized as an innovative approach to increase health and well-being. In Canada, there is a strong connection between cultural participation and health and well-being (Hill, 2013). Women and other groups of people who have been historically marginalized seem to feel more benefited from participating in art processes (Tepper et al., 2014). Numerous Indigenous women artists in Canada use traditional native crafts to emphasize unresolved problems of social justice and to dispel stereotypical notions about Indigenous people. See, for example, Winnipeg’s Métis artist Jaime Black, who created *The REDress Project*,<sup>9</sup> an ongoing installation through which she reflects on the gendered and racialized nature of violent crimes against Indigenous women. Made from dozens of red dresses collected from the community and hung in public spaces, this piece is a visual reminder of the nearly 1,200 Indigenous women who have been murdered or gone missing over the last 30 years in Canada. *Walking With Our Sisters*<sup>10</sup> is a travelling installation made of almost 2,000 moccasin vamps. Participants are invited to walk barefoot on a path of cloth alongside the vamps, to remember and honour missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls. Another meaningful Indigenous project is *The Faceless Dolls Project*,<sup>11</sup> an initiative of The Native Women's Association of Canada that uses dolls to bring attention to the issue of murdered and missing Indigenous women. Through workshops facilitated by artist Gloria Larocque, participants created visual representations of 582 documented cases of missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls in Canada, embodying the alarming dimension of this problem.

In South Africa, where the rate of gender-based violence is among the highest in the world, there are many powerful examples of art that has been done by women to explore, share, and resist histories of sexual violence. *Dirty Laundry*,<sup>12</sup> an installation by South African artists Nondumiso Msimanga and Jenny Nijenhuis—both sexual assault survivors—displays 3,600 pairs of used female underwear (the number of rapes happening in South Africa every day). The underwear, donated by other survivors of sexual violence to share their stories and create awareness on this issue, hung on a 1.2-km-long washing line suspended above the streets of Johannesburg. *Loslappies*<sup>13</sup> is a project that looks at how women’s bodies and sexuality are described in ways that perpetuate and normalize violence. Embroidering on underwear, the collective Boitumelo, in collaboration with Erica Lüttich, present words in multiple South African languages that refer to women with derogatory connotations.

These are just a few but powerful examples of how resistance through the arts in relation to everyday acts can destabilize social norms, contributing to positive changes and rejecting oppressive social structures, relations, and identities. Another good example of creating awareness and promoting resistance through art is Maria Ezcurra’s *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress* (2016), a participatory research-creation work that explores notions of romantic love and how it affects women’s identities and relationships. Wedding dresses were collaboratively transformed to explore, represent, and resist the perpetuation of normative femininity and normalization of violence against women behind Western wedding imagery (White, 2015).



Fig. 1, Fig. 2., and Fig. 3: Anne, Flavia and Des (2016). Part of the series *The Threads, Trends and Threats of the Wedding Dress*, by Maria Ezcurra in collaboration with the participants.

It is quite significant that most of the women artists mentioned above incorporate garments in their work to address gendered-based violence. Dress, as an important aspect of material culture, is continually mediating between the body and the world, participating in the construction of gender stereotypes that affect women’s beliefs and social practices (Crane, 2000). However, actively transformed into art, clothing (and the body) has the capacity of disrupting or resisting heteronormative operations of power.

Based on both the personal and social implications of dress, many artists use it in their work to resist social rules and taboos (Teunissen, 2009). Agency and performativity are significant elements of these artworks, influencing the form in which gendered bodies are socially produced and individually signified.

What is clear in these arts-based projects is that many girls and women, both within Indigenous communities and beyond, are shaping and reshaping familiar situations as forms of resistance against oppressive systems that intend to restrict them. The arts and other visual explorations are commonly used to share the experiences of oppressed groups and question their circumstances, understanding creativity not only as a site of resistance, but also as an opportunity for learning and enjoyment. Historically, diverse groups of girls and women have used the arts and crafts as a form of resistance to critical issues that affect and restrict their lives, allowing them to become active agents of change (Clover, 2005, 2011). Today, new technologies and media, such as cellphilmaking, participatory video, community radio production, podcasts, digital collage, drawing, map making, and storytelling, are also becoming imaginative and innovative practices used by women, youth, and Indigenous communities to educate, empower, resist and demand justice. Resistance not only works as a symbolic opposition to restrictive norms, but also as a way to positively change environments with the participants' attempts to eliminate oppressive societal structures and identities.

### **Picturing Resistance: Studying Participant-Produced Images**

In this section, we consider the images produced by Indigenous girls and young women in Canada and South Africa in the context of *Networks for Change and Well-being: Girl-led 'From the Ground-Up' Policy Making to Address Sexual Violence in Canada and South Africa*, a six-year study involving girls and young women between the ages of 14 and 24, meeting in eight field sites in the two countries. Through a range of arts-based visual approaches such as cellphilmaking, PhotoVoice, and digital storytelling carried out through community and school-based workshops, the participants have been engaged in identifying what they see as the key challenges and solutions to sexual violence.

The broad objectives for the study include the following:

1. To build knowledge and understanding from disciplinary, interdisciplinary, and/or cross-sectoral perspectives on sexual violence through support for leading researchers in both Canada and South Africa;
2. To build the capacity of girl-focused community structures to combat sexual violence;
3. To deepen an understanding of Indigenous knowledge (in relation to methodologies, ethics, and well-being) in the context of a transnational study of Indigenous girlhoods;
4. To advance the application of digital and social media tools in participatory research, and the development of innovations in communication networks in addressing sexual violence;
5. To study the impact of participatory policy-making in relation to sexual violence in local, national, and international communities;
6. To create a transnational platform for raising awareness and advocacy on sexual violence.

To date, we have written about some of the methodological issues in the study—the “how” of participatory visual engagement in addressing sexual violence (De Lange, Moletsane, & Mitchell, 2015), policy dialogue (De Lange, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2015), ethical challenges in carrying out participatory visual research (Treffry-Goatley, Wiebesiek, & Moletsane, 2016; Treffry-Goatley, Wiebesiek, Moletsane, & De Lange, forthcoming), and the idea of the engagement of girls and young women in political activism (Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, in press a). How to look at activism and how to read activism in the context of well-being offers, we think, another way to think about the images being produced by the participants. Building on the idea of working with visual images as highlighted in the section above, what can we learn about well-being?

In analyzing the collection of images, some of which also include captions, we have been interested in how resistance has been represented across the various field sites. We acknowledge that resistance is itself a term that is open to interpretation, and that as Kovach (2009) observes, it is critical to recognize that Indigenous inquiry in itself is as type of “resistance research” (p. 18). Some of the representations in the data set have been explicitly about resistance as we see in a poster produced by a group of Indigenous girls and young women in Eastern Canada. The poster carries the caption “Resisting Sexual Violence” (Networks4Change, 2017, p. 16). Others take up the issue of resistance through the images themselves as in an image of a body gesture such as a hand pushing back.

As a way to explore the images and how they might inform the idea of picturing resistance, we draw on the work of Gillian Rose (2012). Rose in her framework for visual analysis talks about three sites: the image itself as a site, the site of production (which would refer to the producers themselves), and the site of audiencing (and how audiences view/experience the images). While as both Rose (2012) and Fiske (1987) highlight, these three sites in a sense leak into each other as a full textual reading, each site can also be read on its own. Here we focus on the site of the image itself as an entry point into reading resistance and well-being. As noted earlier, the actual image collection of our research to date is made up of photographs, posters, cellfilms, digital stories, bodymaps, storyboards, collages, and other forms of visual art.<sup>14</sup> In our analysis we build on the idea of “working with a single photograph” (Moletsane & Mitchell, 2007, p. 89) and the approaches of Batchen, Gidley, Miller, and Prosser (2014) in their compelling collection, *Picturing Atrocity: Photography in Crisis*. In that work, various authors offer essays on individual images from some of the most atrocious events in history, ranging from the iconography of famine, to the atrocity of severed hands in the Congo, 1904-1913.

Here we examine two posters selected from a collection of policy poster images produced by a group of Indigenous young women in South Africa: *My body, your toy? No such luck!* and *Unsafe: In my space*. At the time that they produced these images, they were first-year university students in a Faculty of Education. The students had participated in a variety of arts-based activities ranging from PhotoVoice and drawing, to cellfilm production. One of the follow-up activities they engaged in after the PhotoVoice work was to embark upon developing policy posters and action briefs (see De Lange, Mitchell, & Moletsane, 2016; Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, in press b). Most of the 14 young women (all between the ages of 18 and 23) lived in the residences on campus, and so when they came together

to identify safe and unsafe spaces, it is not surprising that the university campus itself was the focus of their images and dialogue, and also their policy posters and action briefs.

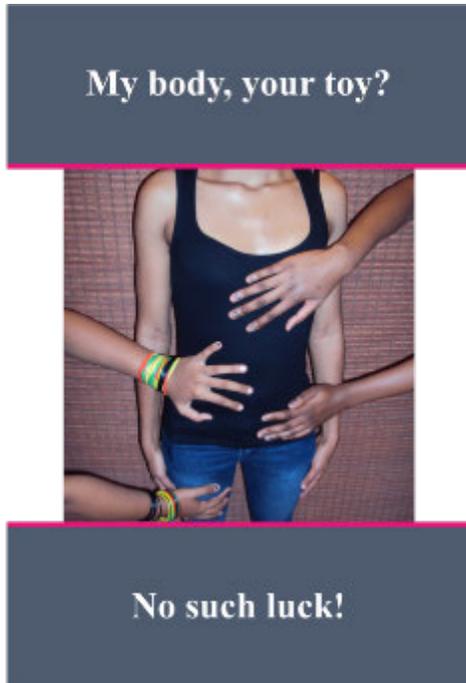


Fig. 4: My body, your toy? No such luck!

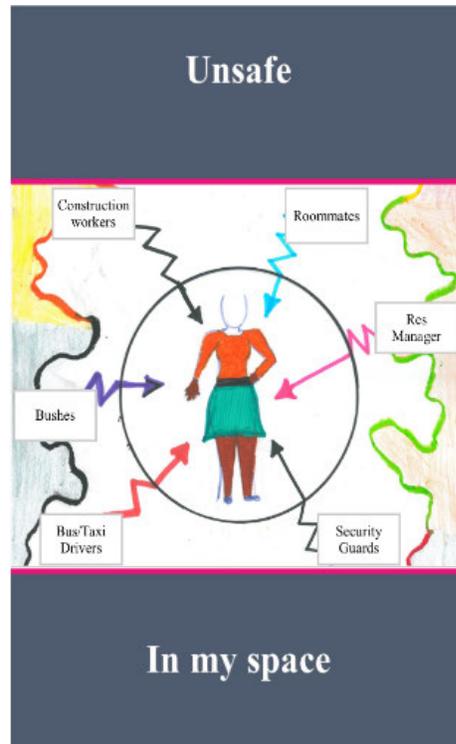


Fig. 5: Unsafe: In my space

Figure 4, *My body, your toy? No such luck!* addresses a critical feature of how young women felt about how they were objectified. The two sets of hands are presented as being very much separate from the young women in the picture. The positioning of the hands suggests the sexualizing of the young woman's body. The caption however, especially through the use of the question mark and *No such luck!*, offers a sharp contrast to the image. The punctuation used in the caption, a question mark and an exclamation mark, signal a clear "I don't think so" message.

Figure 5, *Unsafe: In my space* makes use of a drawing to represent resistance. The section of the caption, "In my space," is in and of itself poignant in relation to claiming a space, and we are reminded of the range of writings and images over the years produced by women artists and authors to claim space (see for example the work of South African artist Thembeqa Qangule, a visual response to her experiences of constructed social and spatial constraints [Perryer, 2004],<sup>15</sup> or the art exhibition called *Claiming Space: Voices of Urban Aboriginal Youth*,<sup>16</sup> presented in UBC Museum of Anthropology in 2014). The image of the young woman is set against a map that suggests an all-encompassing sense of danger. The six unsafe spaces listed are daunting: bus/taxi drivers, bushes, construction workers, roommates, the residence manager, and security guards, and represent a multitude of places where young women do not feel safe. It is worth noting that one of their cellphilms deals with the theme of "sexually transmitted marks,"

highlighting the fact that they are also not safe in the classroom, where the possibilities for sexual harassment and transactional sex (an instructor will offer a higher grade for a course if the young women consent to sex) are great.

Both poster images carry with them the idea of picturing resistance (this is my body, this is my space), but also picturing *as resistance* since the poster genre they use is a genre that is typically a feature of public discourse (see Buckingham & Sefton-Green, 1994; Mitchell & Burkholder, 2015). The images in the posters are directed towards potential perpetrators, and, as such, offer up the theme of resistance in relation to audience. In the case of *My body, your toy? No such luck!* we have an association with intimate partner violence and the idea of countering a type of rape culture. *Unsafe: In my space* targets more generalized harassment coming from construction workers and security guards.

What is key about these two examples is their local appeal and the idea that policy dialogue can happen “on the ground” through the actions of a group of 14 young women. In this case “the ground” is at the level of the university itself and involving local actors such as the residence manager or dean of students. While this may seem far away from establishing a national policy on campus-based violence, it is this local activism, as Jessica Taft (2012) argues, that can be so important to bringing about change precisely because it is at a local level. While these may not look from the outside like dramatic examples of activism and resistance, the discourses contained within these policy posters suggest an ownership of the ideas and an intent to do something. It is worth noting that the young women, “Girls Leading Change” as they described themselves, have also gone on to produce a collection of written narratives, *14 Times a Woman: Indigenous Stories From the Heart* (2016). Many of these narratives come out of the initial group work of cellphilmimg, PhotoVoice, and drawing, and, as Nokukhanya Ngcobo (2016) notes in her review of the collection, draw attention to the significance of personal expression and well-being.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Through examples from the body of literature on activism, resistance, and the arts in relation to sexual violence and through examples from our fieldwork, we have argued in this article that integrating the idea of resistance and activism into frameworks on well-being seems to be particularly relevant to work with young people in school and in community contexts. We know that this requires much more research, acknowledging as Ballard and Ozer (2016) do, that to date, there is little research on the role of activism and resistance in relation to health and well-being of young people even though, as the authors point out, youth activism is associated with self-esteem, empowerment, and self-confidence. Interestingly, while we have various publications which offer broader perspectives on audience and spectatorship as can be seen in the work of James Elkins’ *Pictures and Tears: A History of People Who Have Cried in Front of Paintings* (2001), Mitchell’s *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (2005), and Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2004), there is a dearth of data in the area of sexual violence on audience research and what the images might mean to those most implicated. This is an area that is being studied as part of the *Networks for Change and Well-Being* both in relation to interviews with other researchers engaged in youth-led participatory research and in relation to policy makers and community leaders (see Mitchell, De Lange, & Moletsane, in press).

Reading the resistance images from our fieldwork against the powerful images of resistance and activism produced by various artists, we argue for aligning work with girls and young women in the area of well-being and work with participatory visual methods through the idea of resistance. We know that the social identities of young people are linked, among other things, to their health and wellness. However, notions of well-being and health are often regulated by policy makers, not always considering young people's social context and necessities. Health is presented as an individual responsibility, more than a social issue, tending to stereotype young people based not only on their age, but also on their gender, ethnic identity, or class position (Brown et al., 2013). However, while young people are the recipients of social policy, they are also active participants in the construction of their personal and social identities (Ballard & Ozer, 2016). As Brown and colleagues (2013) highlight, young people are actively reshaping and resisting dominant discourses, including those related to health and well-being, by taking control over their own identities and reshaping social policies. Young people, like others, are likely to flourish in a climate of activism. Activists perceive their lives as more vital, happy, and fulfilled than non-activists. Activism is important for social justice and the development of youth (Ballard & Ozer, 2016) and an inherently motivating activity that satisfies important psychological needs and a healthy functioning. As Klar and Kasser (2009) note, promoting positive personal development, activism—understood here as a political engagement to influence social change—is associated with higher levels of both personal and social well-being. We conclude then that engagement through art, activism, and resistance can play a role in young girls and women's healthy development, resulting in personal empowerment and ideally, structural changes to resist stereotypical categorizations and identifications of race, gender, sexuality, and class. Considering the importance of studying the world from the standpoint of girls and young women both as knowers and as actors (Oakley, 1994), we go back to the fieldwork data where the young women articulated their resistance through captions such as "in my space" and "no such luck!", we get a sense of how the arts and visual practices might allow young people to flourish in difficult circumstances.

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## Notes

1. Fact Sheet: *Violence Against Aboriginal Women*: [https://nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Fact\\_Sheet\\_Violence\\_Against\\_Aboriginal\\_Women.pdf](https://nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Fact_Sheet_Violence_Against_Aboriginal_Women.pdf)

2. Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada website: <http://www.trc.ca/> and The South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission: <http://www.justice.gov.za/trc/>
3. Human Rights Watch website: <https://www.hrw.org/>
4. United Nations website: <http://www.un.org/en/index.html>
5. National Inquiry website: <http://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca>
6. See <http://www.gov.za/services/launch-national-council-against-gender-based-violence>
7. The Chief Public Health Officer's Report on the State of Public Health in Canada, 2011: *Youth and Young Adults – Life in Transition*: <http://www.phac-aspc.gc.ca/cphorsphc-respcacsp/2011/index-eng.php>
8. See for example: <https://www.pastemagazine.com/articles/2017/01/subway-therapy-art.html>
9. *The REDress Project*: <http://www.redressproject.org>
10. *Walking With Our Sisters*: <http://walkingwithoursisters.ca>
11. *The Faceless Dolls Project*: [https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2012\\_Building\\_on\\_the\\_Legacy\\_of\\_NWAC\\_Faceless\\_Doll\\_Project.pdf](https://www.nwac.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/2012_Building_on_the_Legacy_of_NWAC_Faceless_Doll_Project.pdf)
12. *Dirty Laundry*: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/02/dirty-laundry-washing-line-art-highlights-south-africas-epidemic>
13. *Loslappies*: <http://www.marieclaire.co.za/class-of-consent/artists-engaging-sexual-violence-terms>
14. See: <http://www.networks4change.org>
15. Thembeqa Qangule, a South African artist and lecturer at the College of Cape Town, uses her work to claim personal and social spaces. Through art, she intends to disrupt and transcend the boundaries that marginalization, oppression, and domination have set around her and her body.
16. *Claiming Space: Voices of Urban Aboriginal Youth*, curated by Pam Brown, presents contemporary art by young Indigenous artists from around the world that responds to their lived experiences as urban Aboriginal youth. The exhibition tour involved discussion about the missing and murdered Indigenous women in Canada, and the Idle No More movement. See: <http://moa.ubc.ca/blog-nyp-claimingspace/>

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# Primary Teachers' Perceptions of Mindfulness Practices With Young Children

Stephanie A. Piotrowski, Marni J. Binder, and Jasna Krmpotić Schwind

## Abstract

Recent research into mindfulness in education supports introduction of this practice into the classroom. This qualitative descriptive study explored mindfulness with young children, as perceived by their teachers. Four primary teachers were interviewed using open-ended and semi-structured questions, allowing them to share their experiences of implementing mindfulness in their classrooms. Using thematic analysis, we learned that teachers found benefits of including mindfulness into daily classroom routines. However, they felt that more holistic approaches, such as guided breathing, yoga, and loving-kindness meditation, could more fully support childhood well-being.

## Primary Teachers' Perceptions of Mindfulness Practices With Young Children

In Canada, it is estimated that one in seven children aged four to 17 are experiencing symptoms related to mental health disorders, such as stress and anxiety, which affect their livelihood at home and in the school environment (Waddell, 2007). It has been noted by Schwartz and colleagues (2009), that 50-74% of adult mental health disorders originated in childhood. Further research has found that children who feel stressed often display anger and depression, which can result in lowered self-esteem and self-confidence (Rempel, 2012). These mental health issues affect children's overall well-being and their ability to flourish in the classroom environment, as they may not be able to focus on the task at hand and they are unable to foster positive social-emotional relationships with themselves and their peers (Rempel, 2012; Waddell, 2007). Since children spend a significant amount of their day in the classroom, teachers have been encouraged to find ways to nurture well-being in the learning environment (Rempel, 2012).

There has been a growing interest in mindfulness practices in classrooms at all levels of education (Capel, 2012; Hassed & Chambers, 2014; Reid & Miller, 2009; Schwind et al., 2017; Smalley & Winston, 2010). Research suggests that the implementation and practice of a mindfulness program in the classroom can help to reduce stress, anxiety, and improve executive functioning, which are the processes needed for working memory, response inhibition, and the ability to plan and carry out an activity with a purpose (Anand & Sharma, 2014; Benn, Akiva, Arel, & Roeser, 2012; Flook et al., 2010; Morone, Lynch, Lossaso, Liebe, & Greco, 2012; Van Dam, Hobkirk, Sheppard, Aviles-Andrews, & Earlywine, 2014). In this article, we present a qualitative-descriptive study on how four primary teachers experienced implementing mindfulness with young children in their respective classrooms.

## Theoretical Framework

This study was informed by a holistic approach to education where the whole child is attended to through exploring the connection between mind, body, and spirit (J. P. Miller, 2006; 2007; 2014) and the significance of creating a learning environment that is creative, experiential, and based on active engagement (R. Miller, 2000). Mindfulness is deeply rooted in the Buddhist philosophy that encompasses the person as a whole being (Hanh, 1987; Kabat-Zinn, 2009).

### Mindfulness

For the purpose of this article, we define mindfulness as “the energy that brings us back to the present moment” (Hanh, 1998, p. 64). The anchor of mindfulness is in the breath (Hanh, 1998; Kabat-Zinn, 2003; J. Miller, 2014; Salzberg, 2011). The “breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body and your thoughts,” it is “the means to take hold of your mind again” (Hanh, 1987, p. 15). The breath is an essential component of mindfulness, as it allows for the strengthening of the lungs, blood, and each organ in the body, which positively affects the nervous system (Kabat-Zinn, 2009). This positive effect on the nervous system soothes the body and allows for inner calm of the mental, physical, and emotional aspects of the body (Rotne & Rotne, 2013).

Mindfulness practices have been commonly implemented through the use of a Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003), as well as through loving-kindness meditation (Salzberg, 2011). MBSR is an eight-week program, focused on mindful movements, awareness activities, body scan, hatha yoga, deep breathing, along with suggestions for integration in everyday life (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Loving-kindness meditation is the recognition that all humans are connected and wish to be happy and healthy (Salzberg, 2011). This type of meditation involves focusing on the breath, while positive thoughts of love, kindness, and acceptance are sent to self and to all the people in the world (Salzberg, 2011).

## Mindfulness and Education

### Student Learning

A quantitative study by Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, and Davidson (2015), examined how executive functioning could be affected through 68 pre-school children’s participation in the Kindness Curriculum. Some of the strategies used were: reading books, integrating music and movement to teach children about emotion regulation, attention span, empathy, gratitude, and ways to share. Upon conclusion of the study, teachers reported that the children who took part in the Kindness Curriculum displayed gains in their social competence and improved levels of executive functioning, whereas those who did not participate displayed more instances of selfish behaviour (Flook et al., 2015). Additional studies with a focus on mindfulness meditation noted increased self-control and calmness (Black & Fernando, 2014), increased focus when learning (Felver, Frank, & McEachern, 2014; Semple, Reid, & Miller, 2015) and an

improved attention span (Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005). Other studies have found that students displayed lower levels of anxiety, as well as increased ability to relax and concentrate (Britton et al., 2014). Weijer-Bergsma, Langenberg, Brandsma, Oort, and Bogels (2014) implemented a "MindfulKids" curriculum for children ages eight to 12 that focused on an awareness of sounds, bodily sensations, the breath, thoughts, and emotion regulation, which demonstrated that it was easy to integrate low intensity mindfulness programs into elementary and middle school classrooms.

### **Teacher Personal Practice**

Crane, Kuyken, Hastings, Rothwell, and Williams (2010) stressed the importance of teachers becoming familiar with mindfulness practices and incorporating them into their daily lives. As teachers are being mindful and engaging in methods such as deep breathing and yoga, they are acquiring the skills and personal experiences needed to teach children about mindfulness (Crane et al., 2010). Crane and colleagues described the mindfulness teaching process that incorporated personal experience as being "in vivo" (p. 78). When an experience is in vivo it involves a teacher bringing in their personal reflections to their practice. As teachers continue to incorporate mindfulness into their own personal lives, there is an increase in their confidence and an ability to initiate and facilitate these experiences with their students (Burrows, 2015; Crane et al., 2010; Meiklejohn et al., 2012).

Capel (2012) used personal narratives to explore the topic of mindfulness and mindlessness in the classroom. Mindlessness is described as "habit, functional fixedness, over learning, and automatic processing" (Langer, 1992 as cited in Capel, 2012, p. 668). Capel (2012) found that often teachers resort to using mindlessness practices due to trying to meet curriculum needs, as opposed to looking at the needs of each individual child. However, teachers engaged in mindful practices were more sensitive and responsive to individual and group needs in the classroom. This awareness of student needs would often lead to more creative learning opportunities for children, where they are able to demonstrate their prior knowledge and emerging understanding of new concepts. By making connections between personal experiences and mindful practices within the classroom, teachers would continue to act as role models for their students and help nurture quality learning experiences and improved well-being of the whole classroom community.

## **Methodology**

The aim of this study was to explore four primary teachers' perceptions of mindfulness practices with young children in their classrooms. A qualitative descriptive research design was used (Sandelowski, 2000). Data collection included both individual open-ended and semi-structured interviews (Hennick, Hutter, & Bailey, 2011). Interviews were conducted over a four-week period in a location outside of the participant's place of employment in Southern Ontario. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. Data were analyzed using a thematic qualitative content analysis approach (Sandelowski, 2000), which offered insight into the teachers' perceptions of implementing mindfulness practices with young children in the

classroom. Furthermore, it allowed for flexibility and for the descriptive data to be represented in a way that was connected to the research (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

## **Participants and Recruitment**

Participants were recruited through purposeful sampling based on similar traits or characteristics (Creswell, 2008), through membership in either a holistic network or mindfulness list serve in Southern Ontario. The sample size was kept to four participants in order to collect a large amount of descriptive information from the experiences of each individual. Participants were all teachers who had experience using mindfulness practices with students in kindergarten to grade three classrooms. Pseudonyms were used for confidentiality and Research Ethics Board approval was obtained.

Ashley was a certified teacher for 10 years, and had been practicing mindfulness for seven years. At the time of the data collection, she was a music teacher for kindergarten to grade five. Patricia was a registered early childhood educator and certified teacher for four years in kindergarten. She had experience with mindfulness in the classroom, and in her graduate research. She is currently an instructor in postsecondary education. Leslie was a certified teacher who had been teaching children from kindergarten to grade five for 10 years. Lastly, Michael was a certified teacher with seven years of teaching experience. At the time of the interview, he was teaching grade one children.

## **Study Findings**

Three significant themes emerged from the interviews: motivating factors for the inclusion of mindfulness practices in the classroom, perceived classroom benefits of mindfulness and challenges participants faced initiating and applying mindfulness practices.

### **Motivating Factors for the Inclusion of Mindfulness Practices in the Classroom**

Reasons for personal practice and integration of mindfulness practices into the classroom were discussed by the participants. Ashley and Patricia had similar motivating factors, as they were both interested in using mindfulness as a way to cope with personal hardships and teacher-related stress. Michael and Leslie started to integrate mindfulness practices into their classroom after being introduced to the practice during their graduate studies. Both teachers had an interest in finding a tool that would allow children to find ways to reduce and cope with stress.

Working in an inner-city school with a challenging group of children, Ashley was interested in finding ways to manage her job-related stress. Some of the teachers at her school were interested in Buddhism, meditation, and yoga. This prompted her to research about Mindfulness and find ways to integrate the practice into her daily routines. As she continued to practice on a regular basis, she found it very experiential and described the importance of engaging in mindfulness in order to facilitate with young children. She explained, "It is a different thing to have experienced something personally versus learning

about it... Mindfulness is an experience, it is an experiential tool, and it is very rooted in personal experience."

Teacher-related stress was a motivator for the inclusion of mindfulness practices in Patricia's classroom. In her first year of teaching, she taught a kindergarten classroom with 27 students in the morning and 27 students in the afternoon. She discussed the difficulty of implementing an enriched curriculum with such large class sizes and having children with different needs. The difficulties faced in the classroom prompted her to find a way to avoid burnout. As she started to integrate mindfulness in her own life, she found that she was more self-regulated and began to realize that being more mindful of her reactions in the classroom helped to change the classroom dynamics in a more positive way.

Patricia described the importance of teacher practice in the classroom, especially for early childhood education students beginning their careers.

*Patricia: A lot of students are coming with their own wellness issues of anxiety and depression... and the idea [is] that if you can't take care of [yourself], you are not going to be able to take care of young children and you are not going to be fostering the healthy development of young children - so kind of teaching those students to attend to their own wellness just to be better educators.*

Michael described the importance of including mindfulness practices into his daily classroom routine as a way for children to relax and escape from stress in their lives. He stated that mindfulness practices acted as an "activity" that young children could participate in to be calm.

Leslie was first introduced to mindfulness practices when completing her Master's degree. She took a course where the professor spoke about mindfulness practices and how they were a valuable tool to incorporate into the classroom environment. This sparked her interest in finding ways in which she could adapt them for young children with varying needs and integrate them into her classroom.

There were different ways each teacher incorporated mindfulness into their classroom. Ashley developed a yoga routine for children with physical disabilities to engage them in the classroom. She had also worked with kindergarten students using breathing exercises such as blowing a balloon and "Take 5" at the beginning of every class. "Take 5" is an exercise that required students to breathe in for five seconds, hold the breath for five seconds, and breathe out for five seconds. Ashley also encouraged her students to become more aware of sound by incorporating the use of a Tibetan singing bowl and First Nations buffalo drum in practice.

Patricia used similar mindfulness practices in her classroom, as she would typically start the day with mindful breathing followed by a Tibetan singing bowl awareness activity.

Patricia also used other methods such as mindful listening, mindful movement, mindful walking, and mindful seeing. In each of these practices, she would ask students to "put their mindful bodies on."

*Patricia: I get them to put their mindful bodies on. That's sitting with your back straight, and still body, and I just have them look around the room and notice things that they hadn't noticed*

*before... At home or at school, [I would] say when you're out on the playground today, I want you to practice mindful seeing and see if you can notice anything that you haven't noticed before or hear sounds that you haven't heard before.*

Patricia often used a loving-kindness meditation to encourage students to send loving thoughts out into the universe.

Similar to Ashley and Patricia, Michael used breathing and meditation as the main focus of mindfulness practice in the classroom. He used different child-friendly strategies such as smelling a flower or blowing out a candle to facilitate breathing. Other ways in which mindfulness was facilitated in the classroom was through the use of a thank you, kindness, and a thought circle.

*Michael: We do a practice when we do circle [time], we will do a thank you circle where they will all go around and have turns to say thank you to someone whether they are in the classroom or not. Or we do a kindness circle, where they say something they did that was kind or something that someone else did that was kind. We also have a thought circle where they go around and one at a time, just say one word or phrase about what they're thinking about... Throughout all of these circles we have a big quartz crystal that's big enough for them to hold and they pass it around. That's their speaking stone. They are not allowed to speak unless they are holding the speaking stone.*

In addition to these activities, Michael's students had the opportunity to learn how to behave more mindfully and become aware of other students in the classroom. This awareness extended to a focused portraiture activity where students had the opportunity to create a portrait of themselves at the beginning and end of the year.

Similar to the other participants, Leslie used various mindfulness practices with her kindergarten classroom that focused on deep breathing. Concrete associations, such as smelling a flower or blowing out a candle, were used to encourage the deep breathing process. Activities using the five senses provided a tactile connection, for example, playing music and asking the children to close their eyes, listen, and think about how it made them feel enhanced an awareness of sound. Another example was the use of "fuzzy buddies."

*Leslie: We call them our fuzzy buddies, and they're just these little cards of these fuzzy buddies and one looks really angry, and one's really happy, and they kind of go in a spectrum. I put them all up and colour them in different colours. Each day they go up and choose how they're feeling that day and they put it under whatever one it is. Most of the kids will be in the semi-happy, some might be really excited, so they'll be under the excited ones."*

Leslie also set up a corner in her classroom for students who felt a need for private and quiet time. This relaxing corner had pictures posted of things to do to calm down, such as counting to ten or taking a deep breath. By integrating different approaches, teachers in each of these four classrooms were afforded the opportunity to observe whether or not mindfulness practices resulted in any perceived benefits.

## Perceived Classroom Benefits of Mindfulness

Each teacher described the benefits they observed by integrating mindfulness practices into the classroom setting. Ashley described one of the main benefits was how the children reconnected to themselves and others. She discussed children making connections to the body and mind over time.

*Ashley: Mindfulness is connecting them with their body, with their mind, and giving them a tool later on that can help them calm down the things that they're dealing with that may be bigger than kindergarten problems.*

In her classroom, she noticed that the children responded well to practices such as singing positive songs, chanting "Om" (sacred mantra), and breathing. The children were very responsive to the songs and "when they came in they really wanted to sing those songs right away." When her students participated in these breathing exercises, Ashley noticed an overall sense of calmness in the classroom. With regard to the classroom energy, "if it went from [a] ten high, it might go down to five [after practice]." The lowering of energy to a calm "5," is a great achievement as she stated that, "they may not calm down to a zero because these kids may never get down to a zero."

Patricia stated that practicing mindfulness was an effective tool for addressing the social-emotional aspects of children and allowed them to learn about their emotions and how to deal with them in order to minimize stress and conflict. Engaging in loving-kindness meditation on a regular basis had positive effects on the relationships between her students. One notable experience happened with two young girls who often did not get along:

*Patricia: I had done a kind of a loving-kindness meditation and I had purposely and strategically paired them up with a kid, but not all of them, but some of the kids that I knew were having a hard time with each other and I would pair them up. I would go through this loving-kindness meditation where they had to recognize that they aren't friends with someone who is just like them, who feels sadness, just like they do and I went through this whole adult-type and adapted for them and at the end they all hugged each other. It was beautiful and then later on that day, two of the girls that I had put together on purpose because they were fighting all the time, and they were just playing so nicely together and they were telling me how they love each other now. [I thought to myself], "They get it." They were like, "Oh right, this is just another person like me." I really thought that was powerful so those meditations are good for that age. It's a little more concrete for them because they are learning about emotions in so many different ways that this just kind of ties it together for them.*

Patricia felt her students were starting to understand what it meant to be mindful and to notice things about their environment and classmates that they had never noticed before. The children were very responsive to mindfulness practices. When given the choice to sing a song, read a book, or meditate they would choose to meditate. She also stated that parents noticed the effects of the practice at home where one of her students said that during a tense moment, he asked his family to sit down and "put their mindful bodies on."

Leslie also saw some positive effects of implementing different mindfulness awareness activities with her kindergarten students. Children were more sensitive to their emotions and developing a sense of empathy

for others themselves. She also noticed a difference in her students' awareness of the different senses. For example, her students could distinguish different sounds and were able to describe how the sounds made them feel. She noticed that mindfulness practices benefitted some students more than others. One of her students often had difficulty paying attention in class and redirecting his behaviour for more productive learning. She noticed a subtle difference in his behaviour and that he was starting to calm down.

*Leslie: My early childhood educator does the same thing, she'll say let's slow down, you're not in trouble, we just need to calm down a little bit. Let's take a few breaths, You're knocking things down, you're running, you're jumping on top of him, let's find something else, let's redirect. So having those moments where we kind of let him be mindful of where he's at and how he's responding to the other kids. He responds well, he's a very smart boy. So I'm finding the short-term effects with him are positive. Subtle, but positive.*

Lastly, Michael described his perceptions of the benefits of the mindfulness practices in his classroom. He noticed that children were more detail oriented when completing coursework and that they were becoming more aware of their behaviour. Children were using more mindfulness-based terminology, such as awareness, and would talk about their feelings. He also noticed the difference between student behaviour in his class and other classrooms in his school.

*Michael: I can see it in comparison to other classes with teachers who don't practice mindfulness and sometimes those classes aren't as well adjusted in some ways - they're just wild or the teacher just can't seem to manage their behaviour.*

The teachers found that integrating mindfulness practices into their daily routine resulted in noticeable changes in student behaviour and overall classroom dynamics. There was a sense of calmness in the room and they felt that the children were more accepting, aware of their classmates, and more empathetic. Children paid more attention during the day and were more detail oriented in their play and work. However, even with the various benefits noted by the participants, there were often some issues initiating and implementing the practices into the classroom environment.

## **Challenges Participants Faced Initiating and Applying Mindfulness Practices**

Ashley described the issues she faced implementing mindfulness into her classroom. She felt that the school board was not constructed to facilitate the arts or different types of holistic practices. With an increase in cutbacks and increase in the number of students in her classroom, she found it difficult to manage safety and behaviour aside from trying to implement this practice. She described some of the challenges that she had working in a demanding job such as teaching.

*Ashley: You're so exhausted because it's such a demanding job, sometimes you're just so tired that you yell. It's like [when] parents [are] having a bad day. When you're teaching thirty kids at a time that are so complex. So [it is important] to be able to find a peaceful way to calm them down that feels better for me, and ultimately feels better for them. It might take a bit longer, but that's okay.*

When asked if she noticed any issues using mindfulness in the classroom, she responded, "The only negative thing would be... how it doesn't fit with the current system". Ashley found it very difficult to try

and implement something new in the classroom with the hierarchies of decision-makers above her. She further explained another challenge she had trying to incorporate mindfulness in her role as a specialty teacher.

*Ashley: There needs to be more teamwork, there needs to be more time for reflection, talk, and collaboration, and more positive attitudes from the leadership. [There] might not be a safe environment for you to take risks, try something so new, and pioneer. If you're not being supported to do that, it'll be a draining experience. That's been my experience.*

Like Ashley, Patricia felt the stress associated with trying to implement a mindfulness routine with her increasing class size. In her first year of teaching, she had approximately 31 students in her classroom. The large class size made it difficult for her to teach lessons or try to integrate mindfulness practices.

*Patricia: I tell stories about it like I would have, a fly in the room, and it was like my whole lesson is out the window because there's a fly in the room and all the kids are freaking out. There are 31 of them and it's like, there goes that lesson. (laughing) It's like you have no control, I mean it's like that with any size, but when there's more kids it's more of a problem.*

Leslie experienced similar challenges when implementing mindfulness practices in her kindergarten classroom. With a large class of 28 children, she found it very difficult to have large group sessions due to too many distractions. This prompted her to work with small groups of children at a time. However, even when working with a small group of children, she found it hard to set aside time for mindfulness due to inattentiveness, at times. Some children in her class had anxiety, as well as high needs, and required personal attention for the majority of the day. Even with the different needs of all of her students, she still tried to use different practices with them and acknowledged the fact that they were still very young children.

*Leslie: [You have to] be mindful of the fact that this is just their innate natural drive for some of them to make noise and throw things and roll around, and that's just how they roll, quite literally.*

Various parameters have to be set in order for the children to engage in the mindfulness practices. She stated that a struggle with implementing mindfulness was around the timing of day, distractions in the nearby classrooms, and her own ability to be mindful. She expressed, "I find as long as I set it up so that it is as conducive as possible, then usually I notice they get something out of it. There's always the kid who's not going to be into it." At times, she noted that if her mind wandered or she was feeling stressed out, the children did not respond as well, "I have to be present with them too for it to work. If I'm not present with them, then they're not going to be present with me."

Michael did not note any issues trying to implement a mindfulness program into his classroom, but described his wishes for more collaborative practice.

*Michael: I really wish that more teachers practiced it because then we could scaffold it. So starting with that in grade one, and then in grade two they actually build up to thinking about it and just seeing how it would progress throughout the years... It would be interesting to see how kindergarteners approach it and how in grade three they approach it.*

Three out of four participants described some of the challenges they have had trying to implement mindfulness practices into their classroom. It was found that increasingly large class sizes, scheduling, and lack of decision-making powers, made it difficult to facilitate holistic practices such as mindfulness. The current education system is not set up in such a way that provides the teacher the opportunity to take risks and receive the funding required to develop and introduce new practices. Michael encouraged more teachers to practice mindfulness with children, especially from a young age. He felt that, by implementing it into their classroom, they could allow for an opportunity to increase understanding and more awareness of the benefits of this practice.

## Discussion

The purpose of this study was to explore primary teachers' perceptions of implementing mindfulness practices with young children in their classrooms. The findings provided insights into the types of practices being used with children, as well as the perceived benefits and challenges encountered. Other themes that emerged included motivators for including mindfulness practices and challenges surrounding successful implementation of practices in kindergarten to grade three classrooms. The teachers described common practices, which included mindful breathing, mindful movement, awareness of the senses, loving kindness meditation, and activities done during circle time that focused on positive thoughts. The teachers observed that the children became calmer, more open to expressing their emotions, and developed more friendships. The children were more aware of their actions and there were fewer instances of anxiety-related behaviours. The teachers expressed their motivation for including mindfulness in their teaching practices as a result of trying to avoid burnout in the classroom and address childhood issues such as anxiety. Mindfulness practices allowed for teachers to feel more connected with their students and be more responsive to their needs (Irwin & Miller, 2016). However, due to large class sizes and lack of resources and funds, often participants found it difficult to more fully implement mindfulness practices with their students.

All four participants focused on breath work during mindfulness practices. Each participant included elements of what would be found in a typical MBSR program created by Jon Kabat-Zinn (2003). Patricia, Michael, and Leslie guided mindful breathing using concrete associations, such as smelling a flower or blowing out a candle, while Ashley expanded this to make connections to how animals would breathe.

While the MBSR program would not be feasible to include into the school curriculum, nor would be suitable for young children in the primary grades due to the length of each session, the teachers incorporated some elements, such as mindful movements and awareness activities, throughout the day. Mindful movements were represented through yoga and walking. Awareness activities were implemented through the use of acknowledging sounds from a Tibetan singing bowl, awareness of the senses from listening, seeing, and the use of a "feely box." A loving-kindness meditation was used in some classrooms, which allowed for the children to nurture feelings towards themselves, loved ones, and all beings in the universe (Salzberg, 2011). Leslie and Michael adapted this type of loving-kindness

meditation to include a "Thank You," "Kindness," and "Thought" Circle, as well as a group discussion surrounding words such as "peace" and "friendship."

Each teacher was able to make accommodations to their mindfulness practices according to class size and the varying needs of their students. Despite some of the differences and adaptations made in each of the classrooms, it was apparent that each teacher noticed their students to be accepting of mindfulness and were able to observe benefits due to the implementation of these practices.

The findings from this study were supported by the literature about the benefits of participating in a mindfulness-based intervention program for young children. In particular for children between the grades of kindergarten to grade three, there have been many positive effects of mindfulness, which include an improved ability to handle classroom demands, increased attention span, and less anxiety (Black & Fernando, 2014; Napoli et al., 2005).

Flook et al.'s (2015) study describing an improvement in executive functioning were similar to the findings that were reported here. Teachers observed their students to be more self-regulated and better able to solve conflict in the classroom. They also noted decreased instances of behaviours that were associated with anxiety. Other perceived benefits of mindfulness practices for children in the primary grades that were not discussed in the literature were an overall sense of calmness in the classroom, an increased awareness of the different senses (sight, sound, touch, smell, taste), and the children were more detail oriented in their classroom work.

Despite the benefits noted by the teachers, the findings uncovered challenges, such as the inability to implement mindfulness practices due to large class sizes, especially when approaching 30 students. Quite often it would take a very long time to initiate one practice, which could be an issue for a prep-teacher, such as Ashley, who has each group for 40 minutes at a time. While Patricia and Leslie spoke about the issue of large class sizes, Leslie was fortunate to have an Early Childhood Educator working with her who would allow her to create smaller mindfulness groups.

Ashley described other issues with implementation that were not found in the literature. She observed that the school board was not being configured to facilitate holistic practices. She was not working in an environment where she felt safe to take risks and implement new strategies with her students. Furthermore, Ashley stressed the need for more financial support and opportunity for collaboration with other teachers, support staff, and principals in her school board. She also felt that the leadership did not have positive attitudes towards these new ideas and needed an opportunity to experience mindfulness practices firsthand. Some of these barriers could be demotivating, especially for new teachers who may be apprehensive about trying new ideas into their classroom. It is critical that teachers have the support from administration in order to feel comfortable trying new approaches in their teaching practices.

Although the integration of mindfulness practices has displayed various positive effects, in this study, it must be noted that both experienced and inexperienced educators need to be aware of the possible adverse effects that may be associated with this type of practice. For some young participants, mindfulness practices could trigger earlier experiences of trauma, anxiety, anger, and nightmares for

example (Farias & Wikholm, 2015; Lustk, Chawla, Nolan, & Marlatt, 2009; Sobczak & West, 2013). Consequently, it is important to discuss with children prior to engaging in practice, that if any feelings of discomfort were to occur, they should stop the practice and to let the teacher know. The teachers, in turn, must be alert to this possibility, and if needed, to acknowledge the student's feelings and if deemed necessary, consult with support professionals. It is important to acknowledge the needs of all children and the many ways they may respond.

## Implications for Practice

The findings from this study contribute to a growing body of mindfulness research in the classroom environment. This study demonstrates that embedding a low-intensity mindfulness program was feasible in a classroom setting through the integration of practices during circle time or small group activities. There are some recommendations for teachers to consider when implementing a mindfulness program within their classroom setting. First, it is important to become knowledgeable about the origins of mindfulness found in Buddhism and the importance of self-practice. In order to integrate this type of program throughout the day, teachers must have experience with personal practice in order to be role models for the students. Since students within the classroom have different abilities and experiences, teachers should take the time to experiment with different ways to incorporate mindfulness and determine whether or not certain practices work well. Children may or may not be as responsive depending on their age, interests, and life experiences. By trying different mindfulness practices, which may include mindful breathing, mindful walking, mindful eating, or a loving-kindness meditation, teachers can reflect upon their students' participation and active engagement in practice.

Teachers can also explore different ways for children to engage in mindfulness experiences by integrating an artistic element. Incorporating an arts-based element into mindfulness practices allows young children to participate in exercises that are engaging and adapted for their needs (Caholic, 2011). For example, during circle time, instead of discussing thoughts or participating in a loving-kindness meditation, children can still be mindful through artistic ways such as drawing or through dramatic play. Integrating this artistic element is especially useful for young children who may find it difficult to concentrate or feel apprehensive about participating in small or large group activities (Caholic, 2011). Mindfulness can be successfully implemented into the classroom, by taking calculated risks, being open to uncertainty, and embracing the journey.

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# smartEducation: Developing Stress Management and Resiliency Techniques

Karen Ragoonaden

## Abstract

smartEducation (Stress Management and Resiliency Techniques) is a mindfulness-based professional learning initiative positioned in a Faculty of Education of a Western Canadian university. Following similar evidence-based initiatives of mindfulness in education, the smartEducation curriculum comprises nine sessions offered in a variety of face-to-face, intensive, and blended formats. This renewal program supports the development of self-care techniques to cultivate personal and professional resilience through a greater understanding and control of breath, movement, and the physiology of emotions. The 20-hour program consists of eight two-hour sessions and a four-hour silent retreat. This article provides an overview of the research supporting mindfulness in education and presents the results of a pilot study conducted with preservice teachers enrolled in the smartEducation course.

## Background

Research has indicated that teachers play an integral role in nurturing and in creating environments that support social, emotional, and academic growth in students (Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012; Oberle & Schonert-Reichel, 2016; Palmer 1998; Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012). Understanding the pivotal role of the teacher in the classroom, it is troubling to note that the literature estimates that between 30-50% of Canadian teachers are leaving their classrooms within the first five years due to occupational stress and burnout issues related to emotional exhaustion, heavy workloads, lack of support, and difficulties to form close relationships with their students (Karsenti & Collin, 2013; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Oberle & Schonert-Reichel, 2016; Roeser et al., 2012). The detrimental effects of an acquired, chronic stress disorder on personal and professional well-being are well-documented (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Schonert-Reichl & Lawlor, 2010; Taylor et al., 2015). These empirical studies also identify variables such as a lack of available support systems and the presence of minimal resources in the workplace as primary stressors influencing health and well-being. Acknowledging that stressors affect teachers' capacity to create a positive learning environment, increased attention is being given to professional learning initiatives which support and nurture the cultivation of mindfulness skills like focused attention, mental flexibility, emotion regulation, resilience, empathy, forgiveness, and compassion (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings, Lantieri, & Roeser, 2010; Roeser et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015).

Recognizing that mindfulness is a predictor of psychological well-being, quality of life, and lowered stress experience, mindfulness-based interventions (MBIs) represent emerging innovative professional learning

initiatives aimed at improving personal and professional practices (Baer, Lykins, & Peters 2012; Brown & Ryan 2003; Lykins & Baer 2009; Ragoonaden, 2015; Ragoonaden & Bullock, 2016; Roeser et al., 2013). Despite the abundant literature illustrating unique and inclusive ways of fostering mindfulness in education, the challenges of implementing these practices are numerous. Efforts to do so in educational contexts have been slow and are rife with concerns regarding personal and professional sustainability as well as the fiscal viability of these initiatives.

Initial resistance to mindfulness initiatives in educational contexts can be traced to the historical tenets of practices originating in Eastern contemplative traditions, specifically Buddhist epistemology and spiritual traditions. Cullen (2011) recognizes that most Western meditation arises from the Theravada branch of Buddhism, Vipassana. As the practice of insight, Vipassana incorporates the seminal Four Foundations of Mindfulness focusing on the cultivation of awareness of body, feelings, mental states, and mental contents.

Notwithstanding the current culture of situating all aspects of mindfulness as a panacea for stress management, an informed and sustained awareness of the history, language, images, metaphors of, not only Eastern, but also inclusive of Western contemplative practices, would optimize the well-recorded benefits of cultivating awareness of the body, heart, and mind (McCown, Reibel, & Mecozzi, 2010).

In keeping with the division between State and Church, at a purely secular level, Mindfulness has entered into contemporary consciousness through the work of Jon Kabat-Zinn (PhD) who adapted his own Buddhist meditation practice for his clinical patients. Named Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR), this clinical intervention was designed for cancer patients dealing with intense pain and suffering. The formal practices in MBSR are

mindful movement (gentle hatha yoga with an emphasis on mindful awareness of the body); the body scan (designed to systematically, region by region, cultivate awareness of the body—the first foundation of mindfulness—without the tensing and relaxing of muscle groups associated with progressive relaxation); and sitting meditation (awareness of the breath and systematic widening the field of awareness to include all four foundations of mindfulness: awareness of the body, feeling tone, mental states and mental contents). (Cullen, 2011, p. 3)

Forty years of research on MBSR has demonstrated that this course of action provides benefits in a number of areas like anxiety, depression, chronic pain, immune system function, heart disease, substance abuse, eating disorders, and improving attention skills (Davidson et al., 2003; Ludwig & Kabat-Zinn, 2008). MBSR has been repeatedly documented to be effective in treating mental health problems, particularly depression and anxiety, in numerous adult populations (Greeson, 2009). Prompted by the robust scientific findings of mindfulness as a tool to support physical and mental health in adult populations, pedagogical institutions are taking note: teachers are enrolling in mindfulness training programs, administrators are introducing mindfulness to their schools, and researchers are devising ways to evaluate the effects of mindfulness in cohorts of students and teachers (Mackenzie, 2015; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Saltzman, 2012). Consequently, revised versions of MBSR aimed at fostering sustainable practices designed to promote resiliency and well-being in a variety of therapeutic and pedagogical contexts have

emerged. These include Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Mindfulness-Based Cognitive Therapy (MBCT), and smartEducation (stress management and resilience techniques in Education). In an attempt to distinguish between MBSR-based therapeutic interventions and MBSR-based pedagogical initiatives, the focus of this article will be on smartEducation, the Canadian version of the American, SMARTinEDUCATION.

## **What Is smartEducation?**

smartEducation is a derivative of the original curriculum, SMARTinEDUCATION (Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques in Education). Developed by Cullen and Wallace (2010), this 36-hour mindfulness-based course, funded by the Impact Foundation and Passageworks in Colorado, has been the subject of several research studies which revealed positive findings supporting the benefits of mindfulness-based interventions in reducing stress and promoting emotional resilience in teachers.

For example, Benn, Akiva, Arel, and Roeser (2012) led a randomized controlled study on the effects of mindfulness training on educators and parents of children with special needs. Their findings indicated that SMARTinEDUCATION mindfulness training “significantly influenced caregiving competence specific to teaching” (p. 1476) and significant reductions in stress and anxiety, as well as increased mindfulness, self-compassion, personal growth, empathic concern, and forgiveness. Roeser et al. (2013) examined the psychological and physiological effects on 113 teachers in Canada and the U.S. of randomized assignment to an eight-week Mindfulness Training (SMARTinEDUCATION). Results showed teachers assigned to mindfulness training (MT) showed greater mindfulness, focused attention, working memory capacity, occupational self-compassion, as well as a reduction in symptoms related to occupational stress, burnout, anxiety, and depression. Abenavoli, Jennings, Greenberg, Harris, and Katz (2013) researched 64 educators using self-reports measures of mindfulness, burnout, sleep-related impairment, daily physical symptoms, and stress demonstrating that the teachers’ mindfulness practices had a strong protective effect against burnout. Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, and Davidson (2013) led a randomized control pilot trial of a modified Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction course adapted specifically for teachers. Similarly, their results suggest that the course may be a promising intervention with participants showing significant reductions in psychological symptoms and burnout and increases in self-compassion. In particular, Jennings et al. (2010) explored how mindfulness, self-compassion, personal efficacy, and positive affect were associated with being better able to offer emotional support to challenging students. An overview of these studies offers the rationale to better understand how mindfulness-based practices incorporated into teacher professional learning programs, including Teacher Education, can support social and emotional competence, consequently improving learning environments. Showing strong support in emergent literature, the above studies demonstrate the rationale for examining MBIs for educators (Frank, Jennings, & Greenberg, 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Poulin, Mackenzie, Soloway, & Karayolas, 2008; Taylor et al., 2015). An important extension of this rationale includes positioning MBIs as accessible and sustainable professional learning models for both preservice and service teachers.

## smartEducation as Professional Learning to Foster Health and Well-Being

Coined in the 1990s, professional learning was conceptualized to promote more active forms of knowledge mobilization (Lieberman, 1995; Zeichner, 1995). Specifically, professional learning constitutes the processes that teachers are engaged in when they expand, refine, and change their practice (Kaser & Halbert, 2009; Mockler, 2013; Timperley, 2008). At its crux, professional learning supports a shift away from the neoliberal-laced concept of professional development revolving around the technical upskilling of teachers and acquisition of policy-mandated techno-rational, and punctual knowledge (Mockler, 2005). Progressing towards a self-aware discourse of professional learning where teacher agency is respected, this paper suggests that the value of introducing and developing innovative, sustainable habits of mind supported by mindfulness practices are important components in supporting and nurturing health and well-being.

As a further attribute to the dissemination of mindfulness training (MT) for educators, Mackenzie (2015) summarizes the plethora of research which suggests that MBIs can enhance cognitive skills, brain function, immune system function, emotional regulation, stress resiliency, as well as pro-social behavior and communication skills in professional and personal contexts. Neuroscience has offered compelling evidence to support the use of mindfulness practices in professional contexts. Scientific studies show that mindfulness training develops one's concentration, attention, executive function (planning, decision making, and impulse control), emotional balance, pro-social behavior, compassionate action, and promotes mental well-being (Ragoonaden, 2015). The regular practice of mindfulness-based initiatives, introduced as professional learning in pedagogical contexts, has the potential to revitalize purpose, improve achievement, and to foster positive interpersonal communication and relationships.

### Mindful Practices in Educational Contexts

Using a logic model and theory of change, researchers examining Mindfulness practices in educational contexts, Roeser and colleagues (2013) recognized the positive effects of MT on teachers who improve practice and the ensuing indirect effects on students who learn more effectively. In their seminal white paper, Micklejohn et al. (2012) suggest that personal training in mindfulness skills can increase teachers' sense of well-being and teaching self-efficacy, as well as their ability to manage classroom behavior and establish and maintain supportive relationships with students. It is for this reason that this paper supports the literature situating mindfulness as professional learning. Responding to the noted efficacy of MT, the 36-hour SMARTinEDUCATION was revised into a more accessible 20-hour smartEducation professional learning course focusing on an experiential approach to stress reduction and emotional resiliency. As a support for the home practices, a smartEducation participant booklet was conceptualized (smartEducation Participant Booklet, 2015). In a response to requests from the Health sector, the smartEducation curriculum has undergone minor content changes representative of interest from Faculties of Nursing and Social Work.

As indicated, smartEducation is an eight-week initiative based on MBSR and grounded in principles and applications to improve and sustain health and well-being. The extensively researched MBSR serves as

its foundation (70% of the program content) along with theoretical framings of emotion (20%) and forgiveness and compassion theories (10%). The aim of the program is to manage stress through the acquisition of skills leading to a greater understanding and awareness of emotions in self and others, creating emotional balance and improving health and well-being. Exposure to and guided practices support the development of self-care techniques to cultivate personal and professional resilience using empathy, kindness, and compassion. This, in turn, creates effective strategies for relating to challenging situations by promoting discernment, concentration, attention, and awareness. Curricular components, supported by guided practices and practice logs, include:

- Introduction to Practice
- Practice
- Reacting versus Responding (stress)
- Emotions
- Anger
- Forgiveness
- Silent Retreat
- Kindness and Empathy
- New Beginnings

## **Silence**

An important component of the smartEducation course is the four-hour Silent Retreat. Why a Silent Retreat? In the hyperactivity and hyper-connectedness of society, silence has many benefits. As our intellectual and emotional lives calm down, and turn to silence, our bodies relax. Emotions that are activated by talking and listening settle into a type of homeostasis, a balance. In sustained silence, our senses become more acute and tune in to quieter thoughts and an expanded awareness of our emotional and physical selves and of our environment (Moran, William, & Heatherton, 2013). An important component of the learning of resiliency techniques in smartEducation are the guided experiential activities done in silence: secular meditation, kindness and forgiveness meditations, emotional and physical awareness, and mindful movement. Weekly sessions involve guided practices, sharing circles, and mindful listening and brief didactic overviews related to the science behind the practices. Using practice logs and having access to guided practices, participants are encouraged to develop sustainable daily mindful habits with the goal to improve personal, emotional, mental, and physical health. The guided practices below provide examples of the mindfulness techniques introduced to participants. (See: <https://education.ok.ubc.ca/research/smartineducation.html>)

## **Benefits of smartEducation**

As an antidote to the frenetic pace of contemporary life, each of the nine smartEducation sessions encourages the exploration of individual pathways and addresses the challenges of being present, aware, and non-judgmental in hyper-connected, hyper-paced professional contexts where burn-out, competition, anxiety, and isolation abound. It is of note that smartEducation is a non-religious and non-

sectarian course delivered by accredited facilitators. Seminal concepts of kindness, compassion, forgiveness, attention, intention, and authenticity as pathways to well-being are the core foundations of this course and support the well-being of teachers affecting the prosocial nature of contemporary schooling.

## The Pilot Study

In order to study the implementation of MT as a potential pathway in professional learning and in Teacher Education, a pilot study was conducted in Winter 2016. Taking place in Western Canada, all preservice teachers (n= 60) in an elementary Teacher Education program were invited to participate in the 20-hour smartEducation program. This occurred outside the realm of their regular program of study and was positioned as a professional learning initiative. Data collection included a self-reported survey, self-reported practice logs and an assignment relating to their experiences in smartEducation. The descriptive pre and post results of the Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ) and a qualitative analysis of the practice logs and the assignment are presented. We sought to replicate prior work demonstrating the progression of educators' mindfulness as well as indicators of daily functioning mediated by the effects of mindfulness.

### Participants

Subsequent to the invitation to participate in the smartEducation course offered through January-March 2016, 19 preservice teacher educators (88 per cent female) responded. On average, participants were about 24 years old, of Euro-Canadian descent, and had a minimum of three years of experience in higher education. Of the 19 participants, 14 agreed to participate in the study. This research complies with the University's established criteria regarding ethical use of data and data collection. To respect confidentiality of participants, synonyms are used.

### Data Collection

Mindfulness was measured using the validated Five Factor Mindfulness Questionnaire (FFMQ), a 39-item survey. This self-reported questionnaire examines five facets of mindfulness: observing, describing, acting with awareness, non-judging, and non-reactivity (Baer, Smith, Hopkins, Krietemeyer, & Toney, 2006; Baer et al., 2008). Items are rated on a five-point scale (*1 = almost never, 5 = almost always*). Observing reflects the tendency to notice or attend to internal and external experiences (#11: "I notice how foods and drinks affect my thoughts, bodily sensations, and emotions"). Describing reflects the tendency to describe and label these experiences with words (#37: "I can usually describe how I feel at the moment in considerable detail"). Acting with awareness refers to directing undivided attention to one's current activity (#38: "I find myself doing things without paying attention"). Non-judging reflects a non-evaluative attitude towards inner experiences (#35: "When I have distressing thoughts or images, I judge myself as good or bad, depending what the thought/image is about."). Non-reactivity is the tendency to allow thoughts and feelings to come and go, without getting caught up in them or react instantly to them

(#21: “In difficult situations, I can pause without immediately reacting”). To complement the FFMQ, an analysis of the practice logs and a two-page essay in which preservice teachers reflected on their experience with Mindfulness was undertaken. Qualitative analysis of the essay surfaced common themes identified by the preservice teachers.

## Results

The effectiveness of the mindfulness university course on students’ own level of mindful awareness and attention was examined by using the overall mindfulness scores of the pre and post results of the FFMQ. Table 1 demonstrates the pre and post results.

**Table 1**  
FFMQ pre and post results

Participant	FFMQ Pre	FFMQ Post
1	3.2	3.4
2	2.8	3.5
3	3.1	3
4	2.8	3.2
5	3.6	4.1
6	2.5	3.1
7	4.2	4
8	3.2	3.8
9	2.7	3.1
10	2.7	3.6
11	3	3.4
12	2.9	3.1
13	2.7	3.6
14	3	3.7

A qualitative analysis of the assignments was undertaken to uncover any common themes related to the impact of mindfulness practices. Three major themes emerged from the assignment. The first theme addressed the impact of the mindfulness course on educational practice. The second theme reflected the

emotion regulation that preservice teachers were able to access, including elements of non-judgment and non-reactivity. The third theme emphasized the improved sense of well-being developed during the course. The following includes quotations from the participants' assignment.

### **Improve Practice**

"I think more than anything, the practices that I have learned will really help me within my future teaching practice. I have noticed how much mindfulness can make a difference in my own life, and I want to bring mindfulness into the classroom and to my students as well." (Carol, course assignment, March 2016)

"I think I have gained tools and self-compassion that will help me continue my practice." (Kristin, course assignment, March 2016)

### **Respond Instead of Reacting**

"My favourite practice is the pause practice. It allows me to manage my emotions and focus on the task at hand." (Marie, course assignment, March 2016)

"I have found that mindfulness practice has helped me to stay present in the moment which has reduced my anxiety." (Nita, course assignment, March 2016)

"I have personally been able to recognize more about myself, my reactions versus responding, my thoughts, recognizing my feelings and emotions and my anger triggers." (Shaun, course assignment, March 2016)

### **Well-Being**

"I have learned that mindfulness is a process, a journey to a deeper awareness and understanding of myself, of others, of all life, and perhaps inanimate objects too, in the interconnected universe. From the first session onward, there was a sense of calmness and non-judgment. I felt that the room was a safe place where I could gain insight into my being." (Ash, course assignment, March 2016)

"I always felt that starting the week on Monday's with class put my mind in a calmer, and focused head space for the remainder of the week." (Maya, course assignment, March 2016)

Students also self-reported on the extent to which they practiced the guided practices at home. All students course submitted their practice logs and commented on related guided practices (Pause, Sitting Practice, Body Scan, Mindful Eating, Mindful Movement). An overview of the rates of completion of the practice logs indicated that during the course of the nine-week program, practices were done with regular frequency: 90% did the daily practices and 10% did practices about three to five times a week.

Considering that the smartEducation course was being offered as a non-credit extension of the Teacher Education program and that attendance was not compulsory, participation in this class was high. Around 10% of the students attended a minimum of four to six sessions; the other 40% attended six or more of the sessions, with over 50% attending all eight sessions including the Silent Retreat.

## Discussion

The results of the FFMQ and the qualitative analysis of the assignments and the practice logs demonstrate that the level of mindful awareness increased during the smartEducation course. More specifically, improvement was mainly seen in being less judgmental and less reactive towards thoughts, feelings, and emotions of others and particularly of oneself. Participants self-reported modest increases in acting with awareness, along with modest decreases in practicum-related stress and time-management stress. The qualitative analysis of the assignment identified three major themes relating to improving practice, emotional self-regulation, and well-being. An overview of the practice logs indicated that a strong majority of participants adhered to the guided practices. These results are reflective of previously discussed empirical studies which emphasize the positive benefits of mindfulness-based initiatives like smartEducation on teachers' health and well-being. This qualitative data supports the quantitative findings (self-administered FFMQ) and reflects the benefits of introducing mindfulness strategies in Teacher Education programs and as professional learning for preservice and service teachers in order to cultivate the skills necessary to become aware of and to regulate thoughts, emotions, body, and behaviour to manage stress to improve health and well-being.

Considering that teaching is one of the professions most associated with high levels of stress and incidences of workplace burnout, the mental discipline necessary to follow guided practices can also function as a skill acquisition to induce plastic changes in the brain which, in turn, shape cognition, mood, and behavior. In other words, teachers' positive mood can contribute to positive classroom climate, which, in turn, supports student learning (Davidson et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2015).

## Limitations

This pilot study provided an overview of research supporting MBIs in pedagogical contexts and a qualitative analysis of a pilot study conducted with preservice teachers. Admittedly, due to the limited scope of the population and the summarily descriptive analysis of the FFMQ, the conclusions made did not necessarily provide substantial justification to move forward with MBIs as professional learning for preservice and service teachers. Results, however, were aligned with previous research (Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Roeser et al., 2012; Roeser et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2015). Future research directions should include a larger more diverse population including gender and socioeconomic variables as well as an in-depth analysis of the five facets of mindfulness (observing, describing, awareness, non-judging, and non-awareness). Further follow-ups should be included at a six-week interval, then a six-month interval, and, finally, a yearlong interval. Despite these limitations, it is wise to cast a gaze at the literature which, in fact, calls for innovative, cost-effective ways for educational institutions to develop and support the resilience of teachers (Lantieri & Nambiar, 2012; Meiklejohn et al., 2012; Roeser et al., 2012; Taylor et al., 2015).

## Conclusion

The pilot study contributes to a growing literature on the benefits of mindfulness practices aimed at educators (Jennings et al., 2009; Jennings et al., 2012; Meiklejohn, 2012; Roeser et al., 2012, 2013). The mindfulness-based initiative that is smartEducation shows promising results, suggesting that this enterprise may be effective as professional learning supporting preservice teacher candidates as they confront some of the stresses inherent in the teaching profession. While also supporting teacher well-being, the mindfulness skills developed in a professional learning oriented course like smartEducation can act as an important component of the prosocial classroom, ensuring the emergence of a culture of learning for all students. As previously stated, emerging research exploring the bidirectional relationship between classroom improvement and student improvement emphasizes how teacher social-emotional competence relates to both classroom climate and student outcomes. The literature points toward a link between teacher agency, prosocial classrooms, and psychosocial characteristics of teachers as important conditions for success.

## Future Directions

Acknowledging the evidence-based nature of MBIs, emergent research is also indicating that well-being can be positioned to promote creativity, capability, and productivity (Nielson, 2008; Seligman, 2002). Further derivatives of the non-credit smartEducation 20-hour course includes accredited variations at the undergraduate and graduate levels supported by scholarly and professional readings juxtaposed with creative and critical practices. Within this context, students are encouraged to explore different aspects of mindful engagement using arts-based practices. Examples of artistic artefacts are below.



Fig. 1: Megan Briskham, course assignment 2016



Fig. 2: Laura Wyllie, course assignment 2016

Reflecting on the import of the inner curriculum of classrooms, Lantieri and Nambiar (2012) acknowledge that the field of education must not only pay attention to the inner lives of teachers and students, but also give them the skills and strategies designed to cultivate skills that foster inner calm and resilience. Similarly, Goleman (2008), emphasizing the importance of social and emotional resiliency, supports the nurturing of mindful teaching and learning practices in educational contexts. By cultivating the potential of mindful awareness, the significant values of personal growth, learning, moral living, and caring for others are also nurtured (Ragoonaden, 2015; Roeser et al., 2012).

Due to the positive results emanating from evidence-based research in Medicine and in Health, MBIs, like smartEducation, are being recognized as non-invasive health and well-being interventions in educational contexts (Mackenzie, 2015). To reiterate, many studies demonstrate that practicing mindfulness decreases occupational stress and compassion burnout and can positively contribute to overall well-being (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Flook et al., 2013). Since well-being as a state has been shown to significantly affect one's personal, social, and work lives, wellness programs should be given the opportunity to expand and grow in educational environments where the presence of stress can significantly and negatively influence practice and ensuing classroom culture.

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# Talk, Listen, and Understand: The Impact of a Jazz Improvisation Experience on an Amateur Adult Musician's Mind, Body, and Spirit

Brent D. Rowan

## Abstract

This paper examines the impact of creating music in an improvisational jazz style on an amateur adult musician's mind, body, and spirit. Learning jazz improvisation skills can help build more empathetic human beings, when the focus of improvisation is on reacting to what you hear in a clear and concise manner. Life skills are developed by focusing on deep listening and communicating with other musicians. Enabling a person to talk to, listen to, and understand those around them builds community and understanding, and lessens the likelihood of conflict. This allows growth and progress to take place in society, making the cultural capital built from a jazz improvisation program invaluable.

## Talk, Listen, and Understand

Music is powerful. It is a part of our daily lives and major life events. It can energize sporting events, celebrate accomplishments, provide solace during tragedies, deliver reflection through life's journeys, and accompany other art forms. Music can affect the same person in many different ways and triggers emotional responses (Batt-Rawden, 2010), and all we have to do is listen. Active instead of passive listening can offer a completely different experience. What is the impact of music on those who are creating it (Limb, 2011)? My ongoing research seeks to explore some possible answers to these questions. No matter what the type of music or the people making it, there are some very important components to consider: who is creating the music, who is it for, and what was the motivation for its creation. These are critical factors in the emotional response generated by the music. This paper examines the impact of creating music in an improvisational jazz style on an amateur adult musician's mind, body, and spirit.

## Rationale

It is my belief that teaching people to react in a musical way (requiring producing a sound you feel based on other sound and silence happening in a space) helps improve the way we listen and communicate with each other. Skillful improvisers can listen to the musicians around them and use their own voice to create a story with the people in their space. Music, specifically jazz improvisation, is not and should not be all about what one person creates; it should be about what that person creates with those around them. Listening to the other musicians can create an informed musical reaction. Expressing this creative reaction by clear and concise musical statements exposes channels of musical communication. Opening these channels lets the flow of emotional expression through the language of music to occur between the

participants in the room (Lim, 2014). My goal in teaching jazz improvisation is to aid in the development of listening, enunciation, awareness, and empathy skills that will enrich and empower daily life. As a participant-researcher in this study, I believe that enabling a person to talk, listen to and understand those around them builds community and understanding, and lessens the likelihood of conflict. These skills allow growth and progress to take place in society, making the cultural capital built from a jazz improvisation program invaluable.

## Definitions

*New Horizons Band Guelph* (NHBG) is an organization for amateur musicians that provides a fun and informative music-making opportunity for adults who have little or no musical experience, have been musically inactive for a period of time, or just love to play music. The Jazz Combo program is offered for members that want to learn about and play jazz improvisation styles and concepts.

A *Jazz Combo* for the purpose of this study is defined as a group of four to 10 instrumentalists with mainly traditional instrumentation (i.e., drums, bass, piano, guitar, and wind instruments). According to Merriam-Webster (2017) a combo is “1: a usually small jazz or dance band.”

An *Amateur Adult Musician* is “one who engages in a pursuit, study, science, or sport as a pastime rather than as a profession” (Merriam-Webster, 2017), and in the context of this study is someone who has reached the age of majority and plays a musical instrument. The ability of amateur adult musicians varies.

*Improvisation* is instantaneously making up a melodic statement based on how the group plays the structure of a given song. The definition of *improvise* is:

“1: to compose, recite, play, or sing extemporaneously

2: to make, invent, or arrange offhand • the quarterback *improvised* a play

3: to make or fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand • *improvise* a meal” (Merriam-Webster, 2017).

## Methodology

The 12 participants of the research were all members of the NHBG program who took part in a 10-week jazz improvisation combo program.

Data collection for this phenomenological study took part in three stages, with the goal of analyzing the impact of an experience. The first method, a focus group discussion, was held with nine participants and started with the question: “Would anyone like to share their perspective on what jazz improvisation is for them?” The topic of what improvisation is was also introduced, as well as what improvisation feels like in the moment. The focus group discussion lasted one hour and all members participated with open, friendly dialogue. I spoke very little except to keep the discussion focused around the topic of the

experience of participating in a jazz improvisation ensemble. The discussion was transcribed, coded, and analyzed. The coding highlighted what thoughts, emotions, and reactions the participants expressed during the discussion. The analysis brought out two main themes. The first theme was how the experience feels to the participants, including how they personally benefit and why they continue to take part in the program. The second theme is the importance of the environment created and how it is managed. For a list of comments related to each of these themes, see the data section below. The focus group discussion was held after week 4 of the 10-week program.

The second data collection method took part in one-on-one interviews, held between weeks 6 and 9. This generated more information about the personal experience of each individual while participating in a jazz improvisation combo. Discussion was held to understand the feelings and thoughts that the participants were having in this context. The following questions were asked to each interviewee:

1. Would you please start by describing the experience of improvising in a jazz combo.
2. Reflect on what improvising felt like the first time and how it feels now.
3. What are the thoughts in your mind as you are improvising with other musicians?

Keywords relating to mind, body, and spirit were extracted from these interviews. The frequency of these words was also noted, along with their relation to mind, body, and spirit (Table 1). The common thread through the interviews was each participant's positive experience and that the learning engaged their mind. The participants indicated that this music-making experience feels good and has a positive impact on the spirit.

The third method was an analysis of videotape from the jazz combo rehearsals. A checklist (see Appendix) was created to note various reactions during the rehearsals. Reactions were grouped into four categories: Facial, Physical, Vocal, and Musical. This data visually illustrated the discussion from the focus group and one-on-one interviews and was meant to show how the members reacted to learning and then how they reacted to a piece of music. The warm-up and first song played by the ensemble was recorded for 20 minutes on three consecutive weeks in the middle of the 10-week program. After analyzing the tape, I began to pay more attention to the members' reactions during rehearsal. It should be noted that the style, tempo, and complexity of the song affects how the members reacted physically. For example, faster tempi were more exciting, but often meant technical challenges; slower tempi relaxed the members. These types of observations and methods of data collection could comprise an entire study on their own.



Fig. 1: Rehearsal

[Click here for video of students rehearsing with Brent](#)

## The Data

The following is a list of quotations from the focus group that illustrates how participating in the program feels.

- It's something that I feel I can do;
- It is not a solitary activity;
- It's a weekly coming together with friends;
- You need this camaraderie to help you, I don't care how good you are;
- You depend on each other;
- The most wonderful thing for me...is the community aspect of things;
- To have that sense of community with a bunch of like-minded people;
- Everybody is encouraging one another;
- Everybody roots for each other;
- You are in there enjoying the music and you are in a different and wonderful place; and
- I am completely enjoying the experience.

The following is a list of quotations from the focus group that illustrates the importance of the environment and how it is managed.

- This is a fun way to learn;
- No one is there criticizing;
- I think of it as group therapy;
- It's a really good attitude;
- I definitely come out of the sessions on a high;
- Being given permission to be vulnerable<sup>1</sup>;

- Very encouraging environment...so it is really important to have an environment where you can take the risk and then when you have the validation then you are more liable to take a bigger risk the next time which is what you need to do to grow; and
- I am completely enjoying the experience and I would echo what everyone here has said and that is that you’re a wonderful teacher and a very fine conductor.

Keywords taken from one-on-one interviews were grouped according to their relationship to Mind, Body, or Spirit. Examples of keywords are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
Categories of keywords from one-on-one interviews

Mind	Body	Spirit
adventure, anxiety, challenging,	age, keep active, relaxed	awareness, awesome, being a kid,
committed, communicate, comparison,		companionship, camaraderie, do no
confidence, copy, counting, creating,		wrong, do something for me, enjoy,
difficult, engaged, hard, hear, imitating,		experience, feel, freedom, friends, fun,
language, learn, listen, making, mental		good vibe, incentive, influence, laughing,
challenge, methodology, mistakes,		like, natural, no judging, open the door,
nervous, patterns, problem, process,		permission, powerful, safety, scary,
realize, respond, story, structure, thinking,		social, successful
try, understanding, work, wrong		

These words were also categorized as positive or negative. Ninety-one percent of the categorized words spoken were considered positive in nature.

The word mentioned the most times in interviews and focus group discussion was “learning”. Adults like to learn; or, at the very least, the jazz combo participants seem to take part in the group because they want to engage, learn, and keep their mind active. During the one-on-one interviews, many of the members wanted to talk about what they were thinking during the improvisation sessions. One retired teacher who would often share with me her analysis of what we were doing and why, remarked during the interview that she felt like she got more therapeutic value out of the jazz improvisation combo experience than going to see her therapist. I realized later that for her this was a Community Music Therapy experience and the improvising helped her express what she was feeling as she was suffering from a long battle with cancer. All the participants came having an interest in learning about jazz improvisation. A few members were quite skilled in other styles or with other instruments. Before starting in this group, they were able to hear musical ideas in their heads, but could not always get the ideas to their instrument in the moment. One member joined the group hoping to develop a deeper connection to another artistic discipline. As a dancer, he always had a strong relationship with movement and beat,

but felt through participation in this program he was able to learn more about the rhythmic components of music, which allowed for growth in his dancing.

Table 2 illustrates observations of keywords from the videotape and how they related to Mind, Body, or Spirit.

**Table 2**

Categories of observed keywords and number of occurrences from videotape checklist (see Appendix)

<b>Mind</b>		<b>Body</b>		<b>Spirit</b>	
<b>Facial</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Facial</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Facial</b>	<b># occ</b>
Frustration	4			Smile	82
Look lost	0			Frown	3
Look confused	3			Reaction to good feel	1
Look content/accomplished	10				
Made a theory connection	5				
Made a musical connection	5				
<b>Physical</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Physical</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Physical</b>	<b># occ</b>
Frustration	2	Moving to the groove	12	Hearing the music	0
		Reaction to good feel	3	Played with confidence	0
<b>Vocal</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Vocal</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Vocal</b>	<b># occ</b>
Frustration	1	Reaction to good feel	5	Laughter	40
Question asked to clarify	8			Silence	0
Question asked for more info	3				
Comment made to "show off"	4				
Talked off topic	4				
<b>Musical</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Musical</b>	<b># occ</b>	<b>Musical</b>	<b># occ</b>
Frustration	2			Play by feel not theory	2
Silence	0			Made a musical connection	1
Loud noise	0				
Speak clear idea	5				
Copy an idea	16				
Respond to an idea	19				
Idea stated and copied	9				
Play by theory not feel	8				
Playing-not listening/engaging	2				
Played with confidence	11				
Made a theory connection	10				

## Discussion

When analyzing the videotape, there was a great deal of laughter and smiling, listening and engagement from the participants, showing the group's cohesion and camaraderie. The videotape also displays some notable "light bulb turning on" moments that show how the brain gets working (Rettner, 2010). Members are seen nodding to each other with understanding and acknowledgment as they are playing music together. The videotape also shows that playing a musical instrument involves a certain amount of physical exertion, which is good for our health (Blackwell, 2006). Through videotape observations it seems clear that participating in a jazz improvisation combo offers people a chance to keep their mind and body active and engages their spirit.

The jazz program is set up to allow a balance between freedom and structure, so that members who have had formal training can enjoy the freedom to create parts within a comfortable structure, and members with little formal training can enjoy the structure while still experiencing freedom to explore the environment. During the focus group, a number of members mentioned that if an environment is poorly managed and the morale of the group is low, they would prefer not to participate. The morale of this group is high: laughter, for example, was recorded 65 times in the 60-minute focus group discussion. A sense of belonging to the group, camaraderie, and feeling heard were also mentioned many times. The structure of a program and the management of the environment the program is implemented in are two of the most important elements that affect the experience of a participant.

In order for a group to feel comfortable and allow learning to happen, slowly introduce small, safe risks until the group feels comfortable enough to take bigger risks. It is important for the facilitator to create a fun, relaxed environment to allow some freedom and self-expression and empower the participants to listen.

The comments made by the participants during the focus group have revealed a nonformal (Higgins & Willingham, 2017) way of learning. With this type of environment, there is structure but there is a great deal of freedom within that structure. This allows for a less stressful learning environment, in which we can have fun with friends in a nonjudgmental forum where risks are encouraged and supported. This motivates learning and engages the mind, while encouraging vulnerability and personal and musical growth. We are also learning to unlock some of the mysteries of how jazz improvisation works. For many adults, previous music learning experiences were very structured and had a rigid formality which often tended to be something that is unlikely to be described as fun. The freedom to move around and explore within a semi-structured environment provides a feeling of comfort, but there is still some guidance. Life skills are developed by focusing on deep listening and communicating with other musicians. The musicians become in sync with each other by learning how to work together.

Developing a need for each other, bringing the group together, and allowing time for developing group camaraderie creates a rewarding and somewhat therapeutic experience. The group members are supportive of one another because of their similar age, experiences, and motivations to learn, however some participants are still affected by peer pressure within the group. There is the opportunity to work

on your own between sessions, then come together and express yourself in a supportive place. It is a space to be creative; the group effort gives pleasure and a positive experience. It becomes a place where the members can have their own voice and experience the feeling of doing something new, exciting, and fun. Being themselves is encouraged and leads to opportunities for personal growth. Learning a bit of music theory gives the members something to strive toward, and listening to examples or modeling helps them understand the goals. Listening to each other and being aware of how the music is working allows for a deeper understanding and more fulfilling musical experience.

## How Does the Data Align With My Beliefs?

Open the door and invite people to participate in a non-judgmental, safe, and supportive environment (Higgins, 2012). The leader must welcome the participants and have fun. The fun and laughter will create a positive group feeling and allow for learning, exploration, and growth. As the facilitator for NHBG Jazz, my approach is to try to learn by having fun. The word “fun” can take on many meanings, but for the purposes of working with this group of people, I think of fun as a way to make the time spent together as a group an enjoyable experience. We laugh, smile, tell stories, and develop friendships. The regular members of the band are not there to train themselves to become professional musicians; they are there for the social aspect, the learning opportunity, and, simply put, they just want to have a good time. When these social components are present, growth of the *person*, not just growth of the musician, also occurs. Jazz improvisation is a complex activity. The mind is engaged, the body is active, and the spirit is nurtured (Cohen, 2002; University of Maryland Medical Center, 2008). Under empathetic management and a nonjudgmental environment, a jazz improvisation setting can have a positive impact on the flourishing mind, body, and spirit experience.

## Summary and Implications

Mentioned numerous times throughout this study was the idea of a safe place to play wrong notes (i.e., creating a nonjudgmental atmosphere). It is important to let people try something and not feel judged. The environment was also fun and light; this was intentional as I feel that learning happens better when the mind is laughing (McKay & Moser, 2005). Who the facilitator is and how they structure the program and deliver the information is very important. As outlined by Frank J. Barrett (1998) in his article *Creativity and Improvisation in Jazz and Organizations: Implications for Organizational Learning*, giving the members the right amount of information, but then providing them with time to explore and figure it out is essential. Developing good morale in the group and setting up a supportive environment is also critical. One of the largest challenges is understanding the various personalities and managing egos in the room to ensure a safe, supportive, and enriching environment. I feel that the facilitator needs to be the conductor of the energy (Bartlett, 2007) in the room—the music will take care of itself!

Participation in jazz ensembles with the NHBG program under my direction is fun. The members join the program and stay in the program because they enjoy it. They feel their minds are engaged as they are

learning in a safe, supportive, and encouraging environment. The environment is managed carefully to provide the opportunity to learn, but in a way that is enjoyable. The amateur adult musician is usually not someone who is training for a career to make a living playing music. It is someone who already has learned how to work hard at something to achieve results and is now looking for an enjoyable activity that allows them to learn about jazz. The tools I am using to provide this opportunity are respect, dedication, and support of the music and each other. We must learn how to listen to each other and speak in a clear and concise manner so that we can understand how to create music together. I call this my Talk, Listen, and Understand mantra and I believe that we are more aware and empathetic human beings if we follow this directive.

The improvisation experience is more fulfilling when it is an interactive experience with everyone in the combo engaging and filling a role (Griffiths, 2014). When the members react musically and physically to each other, there is a more supportive and encouraging environment where risks can be taken and growth can occur. Listening to each other helps develop awareness skills and an understanding of what each other is doing. An increase in awareness can lead to an increase in developing empathy. Listening to what another person does with the same information (provided the environment is encouraging and supportive) helps build a sense of cohesion in the group. Members feel like we are all in this together: learning and exploring with awareness of what each person is doing.

The following two quotations from the focus group illustrate the impact jazz improvisation can have on an amateur adult musician: "Improv is like a life skills...I want to listen and I want to have those life skills", and "Improvisation is the nature of existence...music is so much a part of the human existence".

## Next Steps

This program has been running for one year at the time of writing this paper, so it is relatively new. I am interested to see what happens over time; specifically, what will keep the members coming. Will jazz improvising continue to be the thing that keeps these people active or is it just something new that fills that need for now?

As part of a presentation of this research, a performance was held called the "Convergence of Life." Professional musicians, youth musicians, members of the NHBG jazz program, dancers, and a spoken word artist were all brought together to show how various demographics and disciplines can work together. The event was set up in a way to create interaction and engagement between the audience and the performers. At the end of the evening, the entire room was moving spontaneously to the music with lots of smiles. The members of NHBG had an enjoyable experience performing in front of a room full of new listeners. Their anxiety level seemed lower than usual, and at the next day's rehearsal the group seemed to interact together much more deeply than the previous week. The positive experience of the performance brought them closer together. Sharing the experience of music making with others could then be the next step in a completely fulfilling experience (Brooks, 2013; Sodhi, 2011) that adds to the cultural capital of a community.

My approach to teaching improvisation focuses on listening to everyone else in the room, playing your own part clearly so that it can be listened to, and reacting to the interactions that result from this listening and clear speaking. The listening is done with the ears and eyes; the clear speaking is done with the instrument, body language, and facial expressions. Gary Diggins (2016) outlines this style of facilitation in his book, *Tuning the Eardrums: Listening as a Mindful Practice*

By means of silent body language, facial features, interruption, correction, suggestive questions, or energetic reactions, it is possible for a listener to subliminally steer or influence a speaker's narrative...The circle we create of sharing must be free of impatience, free of demand, and certainly free of judgement. (p. 120)

If the skills of listening and speaking clearly can be improved, then a deeper understanding of each other can be attained. My hope is that a Talk, Listen, and Understand mantra will grow from the jazz improvisation setting and influence daily life. When it does, we are creating more empathetic people with a greater awareness of their environment and a greater understanding of how to exist harmoniously within that environment.

## Note

1. My interpretation of this quote is based on the belief that we create a space where people can feel safe enough to take a chance without being criticized. It is not just because they are adults; I watch them still get stage fright and be shy about playing in front of others, but over time in this environment they relax and feel safe enough to try something new!

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Photo credit: Gee Wong

## Appendix

### Observational Reaction Checklist

	Participant											
<b>Facial</b>												
Smile												
Frown												
Frustration												
Reaction to good in the pocket feel												
Look lost												
Look confused												
Look of content or accomplishment												
Made a theory connection												
Made a musical connection												
<b>Physical</b>												
Frustration												
Moving to the groove												
Hearing the music												
Reaction to good in the pocket feel												
Played with confidence												
<b>Vocal</b>												
Laughter												
Silence												
Frustration												
Reaction to good in the pocket feel												
Question asked to clarify												
Question asked to get more info												
Comment made to show off												
Talked off topic												

<b>Musical</b>													
Frustration													
Silence													
Loud noise													
Speak clear idea													
Copy an idea													
Respond to an idea													
Idea stated and copied													
Play by theory not feel													
Play by feel not theory													
Played with confidence													
Made a theory connection													
Made a musical connection													
Playing but not listening/engaging													



# Living Tensions of Co-Creating a Wellness Program and Narrative Inquiry Alongside Urban Aboriginal Youth

Lee Schaefer, Sean Lessard, and Brian Lewis

## Abstract

This paper is based on a three-year study that has a dual purpose: firstly, to create a program to attend to the health and wellness of Aboriginal children and youth, and secondly, to narratively inquire into the experiences of the children and youth who participate in the wellness program. In an attempt to disrupt intervention type models that position Aboriginal youth as at-risk, or in-deficit, we pose questions around how wellness programming and research begin in different commitments when we see Aboriginal youth as knowledge holders.

## Living Tensions of Co-Creating a Wellness Program and Narrative Inquiry Alongside Urban Aboriginal Youth

This paper is based on a study that has a dual purpose: firstly, to create a program to attend to the health and wellness of Aboriginal children and youth, and secondly, to narratively inquire into the experiences of the children and youth who participate in the wellness program. One purpose of this paper is to explore how research paradigms played a role in both our wellness program decisions and research design; it is within these pragmatic experiences that we are looking to contribute to the literature around community-based Aboriginal youth and wellness research. The second purpose of this paper is to attend to the tensions and bumping places that arose as we attempted to co-create, and maintain, a narrative inquiry alongside urban Aboriginal youth, their families, and their communities at the same time as we lived out a program funded to provide health and wellness opportunities for children and youth. In an attempt to disrupt intervention type models that position Aboriginal youth as at-risk, or in-deficit, we pose questions around how wellness programming and research begin in different commitments when we see Aboriginal youth as knowledge holders.

## From the Midst

*The bell rings to signal the end of the school day in this prairie city neighbourhood. The end of the school day also marks the beginning of Growing Young Movers, the physical movement and wellness program for youth that we are a part of. We always gather in a circle at the beginning of the program. Jade, a grade 4 student, and Tanya, who is in high school, pass around homemade muffins Jade's Grandma made for us. We begin simply, with a wonder about what is new in their busy lives. We are not surprised as Colt shares his excitement of getting a puppy compounded by his struggles of finding time to walk her before he catches his morning school bus. Brandon talks about his weekend at his Dad's place; Kerri shows the group her artwork from her school art class; Eric shares how delicious the muffin is. Each time we sit in a circle, we learn*

*more about each other and we learn more about how we want to relate to one another within this physical place. Our sharing circle ends with laughter as we outline the plans for the rest of our time together which always includes physical movement activities, games and play. (Field Text, November 12, 2014)*

We begin with this field text that gives a sense of our narrative inquiry alongside Aboriginal children and youth in an ongoing after school program (Growing Young Movers) that is positioned in a funded health and wellness research project. The opening fragment of our field text offers a glimpse, a snapshot of a moment within the gymnasium each week where we have learned the importance of opening up an intentional space to learn, to listen carefully, and honour the stories of experiences of Aboriginal children and youth. This might appear to some readers as attending to unnecessary details of Aboriginal kids *telling stories* that are not explicitly linked to wellness. *Sitting* in a circle in a wellness and physical activity research study may also be seen as detrimental to increasing moderate to vigorous physical activity (MVPA), which is the focus of many after school physical activity programs. However, we see these small intentional moments in other ways, as part of a larger ontological commitment to Aboriginal children and youth's experiences within community. We move this way in relationship with both intention and purpose.

The overall study has a dual purpose: firstly, to create a program to attend to the health and wellness of Aboriginal children and youth, and secondly, to narratively inquire into the experiences of the children and youth who participate in the wellness program. We come to this research with specific backgrounds and a desire to engage in community-based research alongside Aboriginal youth and families. Sean, one of the researchers, is Woodland Cree from the Montreal Lake Cree Nation in Northern Saskatchewan Treaty 6 territory. Sean participated in an earlier narrative inquiry alongside Aboriginal children and youth in an after-school art club in a junior high school (Lessard, 2015; Chung, 2016). The earlier study, designed to explore the experiences of Aboriginal youth both in and out of schools, established an art club where researchers and youth could come to know each other and where relationships could be nurtured that allowed researchers to move to outside of school places. In the design of the Growing Young Movers program, we drew on a similar design, albeit aware that the larger social, institutional, and funding narratives in our project were centrally designed with a program focus. It was in living out the dual purposes that we became attentive to the paradigms at work that created tensions and occasionally bumping places as we worked to offer a wellness program and engage in a narrative inquiry into children's and youth's experiences (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999).

One purpose of this paper is to explore how research paradigms played a role in both our wellness program decisions and research design; it is within these pragmatic experiences that we are looking to contribute to the literature around community-based Aboriginal youth and wellness research. The children and youth know that they are participating in both a program and a narrative inquiry. As we live alongside children and youth in this after-school time period, in a school gymnasium place, we are attentive to the kind of space being co-composed between each of us that allows us to understand more about each other's lives and, in turn, each other's ideas of wellness. Attention to research spaces and paradigms matter.

They matter because they tell us something important about the researcher's standpoint. They tell us something about the proposed relationship to Other(s)...They tell us how the researcher intends to take account of multiple conflicting and contradictory values she will encounter. (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba 2011, p. 7)

We have found that they also matter because when attended to carefully, the experienced tensions can teach us about bumping between paradigms, and possibly provide ways forward to think and respond attentively as community members and researchers.

The second purpose of this paper is to attend to the tensions and bumping places that arose as we attempted to co-create, and maintain, a narrative inquiry alongside urban Aboriginal youth, their families, and their communities at the same time as we lived out a program funded to provide health and wellness opportunities for children and youth. While universities and granting agencies strive to diversify knowledge translation, and to connect with communities, the grand narratives (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, Clandinin, 2007) surrounding research may not be coherent with the inclusion of communities outside of universities as knowledge holders. In this particular case, the need to research efficiently and garner generalizable results to meet funding deliverables clashed with what we have come to understand as narrative inquirers engaged in research with Aboriginal children, youth, and families that call us to move slowly in relationship to more fully understand, and take care of, the shared experiences. The Indigenous writer Cajete (1994) reminds us that, "community is the place where the forming of the heart and the face of the individual as one of the people is the most fully expressed" (p. 164). From our experiences in the Centre for Research for Teacher Education at the University of Alberta, from past narrative inquiries, and from working in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, we see participants, families, and communities, as rich with experiences and knowledge that help inform both practice and research. As we engaged alongside the children and youth, and lived out methodological commitments grounded in narrative inquiry as both research methodology and phenomenon under study (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), we identified bumping places that became apparent as we lived in the field and inquired into our field texts. We illustrate these bumping places in this paper. The opening field text reminds us that we are trying to hold open a space that allows us to stay awake to what matters in relation, to how we want to live alongside youth as narrative inquirers within a co-composed wellness research space at the same time as we lived out *the plans* for the health and wellness program.

## **Narrative Inquiry**

Given our first purpose of the paper, to explore how research paradigms shaped our program decisions and research design, it is important to make the paradigm we are working from transparent. We work with, and from, the following definition of narrative inquiry.

Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience. Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study. (Connelly & Clandinin, 2006, p. 375)

Understanding, as Dewey (1938) does, that experiences grow out of past experiences and lead into future experiences, we purposefully returned to earlier experiences that shaped how we imagined implementing a health and wellness program while living alongside urban Aboriginal children and youth in a narrative inquiry. We came to these programs and research decisions with experiences of being passionate about sport, movement, and health in our lives and our work. We had experiences of being alongside youth as teachers, counselors, and youth workers, who worked alongside children and youth in community. We had spent time in relationship and in ceremony with Elders and knowledge keepers that also helped us to think carefully about the details of the proposed study, including the commitment to honour the relationships and to take care of the stories of children and youth in relationally ethical ways (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

As we imagined the narrative inquiry, Lee and Sean were new Assistant Professors at the University of Regina, Saskatchewan. Brian Lewis, a doctoral student, was a physical education consultant in the city. We (Sean and Lee) inquired into our past experiences of beginning narrative inquiries, and understood the importance of working alongside others in a research community. Working alongside others in project communities and response communities (Clandinin, 2013; Lessard, 2014), we knew collaborative work informed how we were imagining the narrative inquiry. We remained open to multiple plotlines, and listened closely to community members, youth, Elders, knowledge keepers, and educators as we searched for a place to situate the program and the research. As we moved to live out both the program purposes and the inquiry purposes, we were awake to the knowledge that we embodied but, given our paradigmatic commitments, like others (Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005) we were also awake to how the communities embodied knowledge; the children, youth, and families would shape both the program and the research.

Given our commitments as academics, we were attentive to the multiple narratives that shaped the funding agency and the public stories that lived around the program purposes of health and wellness for Aboriginal children and youth, in most cases underscored by intervention and prevention. Paying particular attention to our own research paradigms awakened us to the larger social, cultural, and institutional narratives that shaped all of us. Working with a narrative conception of experience, Clandinin and Rosiek (2007) pointed out that

Framed within this view of experience, the focus of narrative inquiry is not only on individuals' experience but also on the social, cultural, and institutional narratives within which individuals' experiences are constituted, shaped, expressed, and enacted. Narrative inquirers study the individual's experience in the world, an experience that is storied both in the living and telling and that can be studied by listening, observing, living alongside one another and writing and interpreting texts. (pp. 42–43)

Attending to the larger social narratives in relation to the children, youth, and their families' experiences in relation to the dominant stories of how to conduct research, both ethically and methodologically, provides a conceptual frame to think about the complexities of creating a research space and wellness program alongside Aboriginal youth in a community. We are compelled to illustrate and share these

tensions and bumping places as others consider research with Aboriginal youth in Indigenous community contexts.

### **Shaping a Research Puzzle in the Midst of Creating a Program**

There were multiple social, cultural, and institutional narratives at work as we tried to coordinate program purposes set by the agency from what we saw as research purposes. Given an in-depth literature review, we were aware that the dominant narratives around Aboriginal youth and their families were stories that often called for intervention programs, (Halpern, 2002) for ways to attend to the deficits or deficiencies with which they were viewed (Kremer, Maynard, Polanin, Vaughn, & Sarteschi, 2015). We were also aware that there were pressures to engage in research, which resulted in measurable outcomes, generalizable indicators that would signify *success* of the wellness program. We knew these dominant narratives had shaped our personal practical knowledge (Clandinin, 1985) and structured the storied professional knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) that we most often travelled within. Our research puzzle shifted as we tried to come alongside the youth, and to attend to who they were and were becoming. We began to struggle with how to sustain a wellness program and not slide into dominant constructions of Aboriginal youth. We attempted to hold a firm commitment to co-creating an ethical narrative inquiry space (Ermine, 2007; Clandinin et al., 2015) where Aboriginal children and youth and their community were the primary knowledge holders. By rooting ourselves in experience and taking measures to actively resist the dominant narratives that story Aboriginal children, youth, families, and their communities as “in need,” or “in deficit,” we co-created a space that opened up new understandings and conceptions of knowledge that would not have been possible otherwise. Quite simply, we learned by moving in a different direction alongside children, youth, and their community.

### **Methods**

From September 2013 to present date we have been engaged in an afterschool, outside of school, program alongside urban Aboriginal youth. Given our interests in physical education and wellness, we used these content areas to organize structured and purposeful experiences around play and movement. We know from our literature review, and from our experiences, that the phrase “after school programs” brings images of *dropping in, hanging out, shooting hoops, playing floor hockey, or throwing dodge balls*. Wanting to be clear that this program was different, it was our purpose to ensure that each engagement with the youth had components celebrating the physical, emotional, social, and spiritual wellness of children and youth within their community contexts. Given our backgrounds in physical and health education and experiences working alongside Indigenous communities across Canada, we intended to create meaningful and developmental physical and health education experiences. Framing the program and research around wellness allowed us to move beyond physical experiences to our guiding question and wonder: what does it really mean to live well?

We co-composed a variety of field texts with the youth including conversations, observations, digital stories, and program evaluation surveys. However, this paper is specifically focused on the questions that came about as tensions arose when we attempted to organize both the after-school wellness program

and research for the after-school wellness program. We came to see these tensions as moments to think deeply about why we felt uneasy about the process. It seems these moments of questioning often moved us beyond the taken-for-granted notions of how things work. Seeing otherwise often times creates moments of tension that can open up opportunities to slow down, to wonder why (Huber, Murphy, & Clandinin, 2011).

Through narrative inquiry, experience is studied through explorations of the personal/social, temporality, and place. For example, as we experienced these tensions we engaged in research conversations with each other asking questions which explored our (personal) feelings, hopes, and dispositions, the social, that is, what was happening around us, temporality, that is, how our experiences were bound in time, and finally, place(s) “which attends to the specific concrete physical and topological boundaries of inquiry landscapes” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 51).

While there were many bumping places along the way, through our inquiry into these bumping places we identified specific tensions that seemed to weave their way through the project. In what follows we illustrate these tensions as well as in closing possible ways forward in this work.

### **Storied Landscapes in the Midst of Interventions and Deficit Model Programming**

Statistically, more than half of the Canadian Aboriginal population is under the age of 25. In addition, 3.8% of Canada's population is of First Nation, Métis, or Inuit ancestry with 54% of the population residing in urban settings (Canadian Census, 2006, 2011). The self-identified Aboriginal population of Saskatchewan, the Canadian province where this study is situated, is approximately 16% with 8.3% of the population residing in Regina, Saskatchewan (Statistics Canada, 2010). Our current study is situated at a time and within a place where the population of Indigenous peoples, particularly Indigenous youth in Canada, is steadily rising in urban settings.

Nationally there are statistical increases in the levels of Aboriginal incarceration rates, unemployment, poverty, and children in care (Findlay & Weir, 2004).

At-risk youth are commonly defined as having (a) low academic performance; or (b) characteristics typically associated with lower student achievement, including low socioeconomic status (SES), racial, or ethnic minority background, and a single-parent family (Miller, 1993). While purposes for programs for at-risk youth are diverse, they usually include decreasing crime and violence, decreasing substance abuse, social issues, and mental health. In general, we also found that programs also included the importance of increasing academic performance and achievement (Kremer et al., 2015). We also noted that many programs were simply an extension of the school day, an opportunity to do more school (Zief, Lauver, & Maynard, 2006; Vandell et al., 2005).

From our literature review we got the sense that many of the models being used in after-school programming positioned the youth as *at-risk* or needing to be *skilled up* in some form so that they could become better citizens, and achieve higher academic and worldly standards. Program and research implementation, albeit positive in some ways, situated researchers at one end of a knowledge spectrum,

and children, youth, and families at the other end. That is the researchers and programmers had *the knowledge* and the children, youth and families did not.

This type of paradigm presumes that the researchers are the sole knowledge holders; they are the experts that have the epistemological understanding needed to in many ways to *intervene for* the youth and *help* them get to a better place in their lives in order to accomplish better life outcomes (health, wellness, fitness, academics, opportunity). Further to this, many of the aforementioned paradigms within the literature seek to perceptually or we might suggest politically, sprinkle the modelling with quasi-cultural, effervescent tones of medicine wheels and totem teachings that are at the very least mis-educative (Dewey, 1938), and at the very worst, exemplars of cultural appropriation further enhancing the colonial relationship that at times is reinforced through research. This way of seeing the world makes certain assumptions about knowledge, whose knowledge counts, which knowledge counts, and how certain types of knowledge can be absorbed to fit Western paradigms. Given our ontological commitment to experience and in relation to the Indigenous community, reflectively it becomes easy to see how the co-created narrative inquiry space that values a storied landscape and children, youth and community experiences bumps hard at times, in many ways violently, with a model that presumes the participant and community as non-knowledge holders.

### **Relational Ethics in the Midst of Institutional Ethics**

Our past experiences working with narrative inquiry, and in Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities, told us that children, youth, their families, and the communities they lived in carried with them an embodied knowledge (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) that would help shape both the wellness program and the research alongside the program. Our program and research also drew on the work of other narrative inquirers (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013; Young, 2005; Lessard, 2013, 2015) who shaped our thinking throughout showing the possibility of learning about the experiences of Aboriginal youth and families through narrative inquiry. From our experiences and from the literature, we understand more fully the relational ethics that are necessary in engaging in narrative inquiry in ways that attend to the lives of both researchers and participants (Clandinin & Caine 2012; Bergum & Dossetor, 2005; Menon, Redlich-Amirav, Saleh, & Kubota, 2015). However, we learned early on that the university ethics board application did not frame experience or ethics in the same way we had come to see it.

We are not the first researchers to see the problematic nature of institutional review boards and their many rules and regulations that don't align with many qualitative research methodologies, in this case narrative inquiry research (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Clandinin, 2013; Josselson, 2007). As spoken about in the research design, we did not want to enter into this particular research space as the experts, or as the sole knowledge holders. The institutional ethics application wanted us to know how many "interviews" we would conduct, how many participants we would "gather data from," and quite problematically, what we would "find" before we even began the research. We should note here that we understand the importance of university ethics boards and support the ways in which they hold researchers to a high standard of ethical care. Yet, as we filled in the small drop-down boxes that

described our study and the youth we would research alongside, we could not help but begin to feel tension working within these views embedded within the ethical application.

We wondered about the dis/ease we experienced as we filled out the application. The institutional ethics positioned us as experts; as *the* knowledge holders. While this may be fitting for someone entering with an epistemological framework, model, or intervention, for us, as narrative inquirers, entering with an ontological frame that positions lived experiences as the starting point, this bumped with our philosophical understandings. Beginning with an ontological commitment denotes that we have wonders about experience, about how individuals come to make up their own realities based on their past, present, and imagined experiences. For us to attend to these experiences, we have to be wary that we do not enter with a theoretical frame about how the world works, thus discounting experiential knowledge (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Clandinin, Schaefer, & Downey, 2014).

### **Tentativeness in the Midst of Certainty**

Along with university ethics, based on our granting applications we were expected to meet certain deliverables that were time sensitive. While we fully take responsibility for creating these deliverables, we felt a disconnect in how the funders had envisioned these deliverables being met. We found that many funders still valued positivistic tendencies that position reality outside of experience. It was the quantitative, objective, measures that would be important in showing how effective our program had been. We assume from the funders' perspective that these types of data carry more validity when presented to upper administration. Positioning reality outside of experience, also offers a perceived generalizability that could then be implemented in any context. In this way, it gives data users "definite knowledge" of the program to inform others, or to perhaps implement the program in decontextualized ways.

"In narrative thinking, interpretations of events can always be otherwise. There is a sense of tentativeness, usually expressed as a kind of uncertainty, about an event's meaning" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 31). In the various field texts collected, we felt a great dis/ease in attempting to interpret these data as definite. We now see the disease, the tension, stemmed from trying to reduce this data, to decontextualize it. In decontextualizing it, we lose the embodied knowledge of the community. The sociality, temporality, and place of experience becomes unimportant; they become sanded away (Schaefer & Clandinin, 2011). We sand away the conversations with Grandma Rose who took us home for tea and told us about what living well meant for her and her grandchildren. The insights gained from community knowledge holders that included the linguistic, historical, cultural, and institutional stories of this community get sanded down to a program that could be implemented in any community. Jade's yellow dress, Colt's puppy, and our numerous conversations with Elders and knowledge keepers about how movement is "good medicine" (Joseph N., personal conversation, May 2015), are seen as additives, as the bow instead of the present.

## **Moving Slow in the Midst of Productivity**

Being committed to narrative ways of understanding, and, in turn, to beginning ontologically with experience, as all narrative inquirers begin, takes a great deal of time, patience, and listening. In the context of many Indigenous communities, these commitments draw attention to the many protocols that are contextual to each community, geographical in nature and need to be followed to enter a community in ethically responsive ways. A process that for our research team began with taking tobacco as a form of spiritual offering to an Elder and community knowledge holder to actually find out what the protocols of the community are and how we might form relationships in a good and respectful way alongside Aboriginal children, youth, and their families. In this community, we were physically located in Treaty 4 territory, the ancestral home of the Cree, Saulteaux, and Metis peoples, a geographical place with meaning and relationships that are tied and connected to the histories and the place. These considerations and protocols that we followed were understood through our prior experiences alongside Elders and knowledge keepers in our lives. While designing the program without consultation and relationship with students, community, Elders, and other knowledge holders would have been much more efficient, our ontological commitment to experience cautioned us against hastily setting up a program and research space that did not include these important first steps.

We moved slowly through the process and we paid attention to the details by attending to the silences, the gaps, and the many conversations that helped us understand further how we might co-compose both a program and research space. Collecting data quickly, analyzing it, interpreting it from our own perspectives and writing papers about it would also have been much more efficient and much more productive from a certain stance in research. However, an ontological commitment to experiences requires co-composed relations and processes that include a co-composition of field texts, a co-creation of narrative accounts as we interpret what we have found, and often times a co-writing of final research texts with participants. Thus, moving quickly, moving in ways that dominant stories of research may see as productive, was not an option within the community.

As can be imagined, this process of moving slow created tension. It seemed to be the opposite of what the academic professional knowledge landscape formally and informally prescribed. While we had secured funding for both the program and the research alongside the program, the questions now turned to scaling up, publications, research impact, and other forms of knowledge translation. For early career and experienced researchers, it can be easy to get caught up in the sociality of being an academic. The social aspects that are imbued with publish or perish, personal feelings of guilt, inadequacy, that come from not publishing. Truthfully, it became very difficult at times to not forgo our initial commitment to the children, youth, and community as embodied knowledge holders as we questioned if what we were doing made sense in the realm of academia.

We want to unpack this conceptualization of moving slow alongside children and youth, the community, and each other in an attempt to share these important processes with other researchers as we consider ways to take these experiences back to the community at all times. Paying particular attention to moving slow, in some paradigms, could be considered deficit or lagging behind; less than what others might

perceive to be as more timely, immediate, valid, or productive research. Here we draw on the introductory narrative to help us illustrate what we mean by moving slow. While moving slow takes more time, moving slow also transcends temporal implications. Converging in a circle at the beginning of each program day, creating a space for the youth to sit and listen alongside one another, responding to others, and sharing a snack, was difficult at first. The youth's stories of the gymnasium space during school hours bumped with sitting, listening, and sharing with others. They had come to know this space differently. Their stories of the gymnasium included chaos, equipment, competing, and what we perceived as a space that was not conducive to conversation and in many ways not conducive to building and acknowledging relationships through movement trying to understand.

The sharing circle that we engaged in each time we met was slow and patient; it took time. In fact, it took almost a year for the circle at the start of each program day to become a routine, to become what was expected within the space. It's just a circle. Simply put. And yet, through this time a space evolved that was attentive to relationships, and attentive to experience that took care of one another's stories, both children's and adults', in a good way. This time and intentional process allowed us to "attend both to personal conditions and, simultaneously, to social conditions" (Clandinin et al., 2013, p. 40) and pay attention to the relational three-dimensional narrative inquiry space (sociality, temporality, place). The students' experiences and knowledge counted during this time. At different times each of our daughters were welcomed to this circle by the youth, as the children and youth from the program metaphorically and physically wrapped their arms around them and included them in the day's activities, welcoming them to their place. Stories of Jade's yellow dress and the small sharing of children and youth stories around the circle each week helped us to better understand how they have come to understand health and wellness, and to notice the importance of moving slow in relationship alongside one another. It is in this way the ideas, philosophy, and the concepts around what it means to *live well*, *to be well* as an Aboriginal child, youth, and community member in this particular place and time looked markedly different and sounded different than what we might have initially expected.

## Discussion

We end by returning to the two purposes of this paper: 1) to explore how a particular ontological commitment to experiences shaped both a program and research space focused on wellness. 2) to illustrate the tensions that arose as our commitments to narrative inquiry bumped with the dominant stories of research. Based on our literature review, we are aware that many programs created for Aboriginal youth begin with *at-risk* frameworks that position the youth as in-deficit, needing to be fixed up. Unfortunately, these frameworks often times discount the lived experiences, the lives of children and youth, and the stories of the community landscapes upon which they live.

We are well aware that not all researchers will be motivated to take up a narrative inquiry, or for that matter use a research methodology that is attentive to beginning with an ontological commitment. However, what we hope became clear in this paper is that no matter what your methodological commitment is, it is very important to attend to its underpinnings throughout the research process. Wonders surrounding how your methodology situates you within the program and research can help to

make sense of your commitments. In understanding how you are situated within a space, as researcher, as teacher, as programmer, as outsider, as insider, as oppressor, or perhaps in a different way, will also help in understanding how the youth are situated within your methodology and, in turn, your program and your research. In an Indigenous context, some knowledge keepers would say this is how you are locating yourself. Although positioning youth as knowledge holders may seem like a small decision, it is in fact the decision that framed our entire program and research study.

What we also wanted to begin to illustrate in this paper is that when we begin with an ontological commitment to experience, as narrative inquirers do, the research process often starts long before what we see documented, written in papers or books. However, we argue that documenting this is important. This process is a part of the methods. Taking an Elder or knowledge keeper tobacco at the beginning of the study to follow protocol is indeed a part of the ontological commitment to experience, and thus a part of the research. Conversations with youth about the type of program they see as being meaningful to the community is also a part of positioning them as knowledge holders, and is thus a part of the research process. An invitation to families for a celebratory meal, or to simply watch or play with their children in the program attends to the familial stories, positions families as knowers, and is therefore a part of the research process. Documenting, attending to these processes, helps to show the ethical attention and perhaps rigor involved in the research and program process.

In a similar vein, and with regard to the second purpose of this paper, we have also become aware that a strong commitment and understanding of our ontological commitment to experiences helped us to negotiate and make sense of the many bumping places and tensions that became apparent as we attempted to co-compose a research and program space based around wellness alongside Aboriginal children and youth. As we mention, without our commitments to narrative inquiry, it would have been quite easy to enter with an *at-risk* type intervention that would have positioned us as the knowledge holders within a community, that at the time, we knew very little about. Tensions with productivity will always be alive and well, perhaps a further understanding of the rigour and ethical work that takes place when we see communities, youth, and families as rich with knowledge will shift stories around how we measure productivity. We have seen universities in Canada recently respond in positive ways to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission document (2015) and the calls to action; we wonder about how rigor and research impact might be measured in multiple ways as researchers work *with*, instead of *on*, communities. Perhaps illustrating the work that goes into building ethical relationships alongside Indigenous communities provides a better understanding of how important this is as we attempt to better understand what living well looks like from a variety of perspectives.

Lastly, if we are truly interested in better understanding what living well looks like, feels like, for Indigenous children, youth, families, and communities, what we have learned is that entering with a deficit model is extremely problematic. Not entering in this way is risky. In many ways, it opens up the research and program to other ways of knowing, other ways of understanding what living well might mean with all the potential and possibility of that concept. With this we give up certainty, and in many ways control over which direction the research and program take. For us, as we gave up the certainty, what we gained was a much richer, deeper, understanding of the lives of the youth involved in the

program. Given what we learn from the trends and tendencies in the literature, we see the need to collaborate with Indigenous youth and their families to inquire into their experiences within multiple contexts, but to do so in ways that are not constrained within the institutional narrative of school, a narrative that has too often overwritten the experiences of Indigenous peoples through scripts (Clandinin, Steeves, & Caine, 2013) and practices that are potentially oppressive and/or harmful in their intentions.

*What does your program do?* A question that used to cause great dis/ease, is now easily answered with the response, “it helps us to better understand how amazingly resilient the youth are that we get to work with each week, something we would have completely missed if we had tried to fix them up.” On second thought, perhaps this is an intervention program. The youth have intervened on our lives and showed us how much there is to be learned from working alongside them.

*The bell rings to signal the end of the school day and the beginning of the program. We gather in a circle. Jade, and Tanya, one of the high school youth, pass around some homemade muffins Jade’s Grandma made for us. We begin simply with a wonder about what is new...*

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# Sexuality Education in Technical and Vocational Institutions in Guyana: Possibilities and Challenges

Hazel E. Simpson

## Abstract

This paper reports on the results of an exploratory evaluation of a sexuality education program that was introduced in technical and vocational institutions in Guyana. The rationale for the program is outlined, along with the methodology employed in the evaluation of the program, including the analysis of data from document reviews, telephone and face-to-face interviews, and surveys of facilitators and students' perceptions of the program. The findings of the evaluation are presented and the author offers some considerations to be taken into account when developing and implementing new programs.

## Background

There is a growing recognition among educators, health professionals, non-governmental organizations, and national governments worldwide of the need for sexuality education for adolescents and young people. Sexuality education has been described as an “age appropriate, culturally relevant approach to teaching about sex and relationships by providing scientifically accurate, realistic, nonjudgmental information” (UNESCO, 2009, p. 2).

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization suggests that the ultimate goal of any sexuality education program should be to equip children and young people with the knowledge, skills, and values which they need to make responsible choices about their sexual and social relationships in a world affected by HIV. In addition, that organization identified specific objectives for effective sexuality education, which include:

- to increase knowledge and understanding
- to explain and clarify feelings, values and attitudes
- to develop or strengthen skills; and
- to promote and sustain risk-reduction behavior. (p. 3)

## The Sexual and Reproductive Health Profile of Guyanese Young People

In Guyana, escalating problems in adolescent and youth sexual and reproductive health, including HIV, led to the recognition by several stakeholders that there is a need to strengthen existing sexuality programs as well as implement new ones. A recent survey revealed that Guyana's adolescent fertility rate (births per 1,000 women, 15-19 years) is 88, which is much higher than some neighbouring Caribbean territories. In addition, Guyana's adolescent fertility rate (15-19 years) is much higher than the global average of 44 (World Bank, 2016). Moreover, there is also some indication that sexual activity is

beginning at a relatively early age. One study found that 4.9% of women and 12.6% of men in the 15-24 age group admitted to having their first sexual encounter before they were 15 years old. Also, 15% of girls between the ages of 15 and 19 years were mothers at the time of the survey (Guyana MICS, 2014). Further, condom use among young people (15-24 years) in Guyana seems to be more widespread among males than females (87% for males; 57% for females); unprotected sex among young people (15-19 years) in rural areas may be higher than in urban areas, according to McIntosh, Carto, Boodhoo, Roberts, and McIntosh (2013).

Since 2009, there has been an annual reduction in the reported number of HIV cases and number of AIDS-related deaths. Guyana's adult HIV prevalence rate in 2013 was 1.4%. Between 2008 and 2014, the HIV prevalence rate among the 15-19 age group fluctuated between 2.9% and 3.5%. In 2014, 1.9% of young people in the 15-24 age group reported to be living with HIV. In addition, 42% of the reported cases of sexually transmitted infections were within the 15-24 age group (Guyana AIDS Response Progress Report, 2015).

### **Sexuality Education in Technical and Vocational Institutions**

Sexuality education in Guyana is delivered principally through the Health and Family Life Education (HFLE) curriculum. Health and Family Life Education, a life skills-based curriculum intervention, is implemented in Grades 1 to 9 in schools in Guyana (CARICOM & UNICEF, 2010). However, the present Health and Family Life Education curriculum does not cater to the needs of young people for sexuality education in postsecondary and tertiary institutions (e.g., technical and vocational institutions). Technical and vocational education in Guyana is offered by both formal and nonformal educational institutions. Formal educational institutions, like the state-funded Technical Institutes, Guyana Industrial Training Centre, and the Carnegie School of Home Economics, and nonformal institutions, such as the Young Women's Christian Association, Board of Industrial Training, and the Adult Education Association, all offer technical and vocational education.

In 2008, representatives from the Adult Education Association and several other technical and vocational institutions proposed a program to integrate sexuality education into the curricula of their institutions. These institutions cater to a student population whose ages range from 14 years to approximately 25 years. Many of these young people are sexually active, while some are teenage parents (AEA, 2008). In addition, some of these young people have dropped out of secondary school or never had a secondary education (AEA Guyana, 2008). For some young people, technical and vocational institutions offer them a second chance to acquire job knowledge and skills. It is against this background that the technical and vocational institutions recommended that a life skills-based program in sexual and reproductive health and gender-based education should be integrated into the curricula of their institutions.

## Sexual and Reproductive Health and Gender-Based Education

In order to develop and integrate the course, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Gender Based Education, into the curricula of technical and vocational institutions, the Adult Education Association was named the implementing partner, while technical and financial support was provided by the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA). The Sexual and Reproductive Health and Gender Based Education curriculum is intended to be delivered over a period of no fewer than 30 hours.

An overarching goal of the program is “an increase in the exercise of reproductive rights and gender equity among adolescents and youths in post-secondary institutions” (Framework for Integrating Sexual and Reproductive Health and Gender Based Education Into Technical and Vocational Institutions, 2008, p. 1). The curriculum is organized around five themes: Understanding Self, Interpersonal Relationships, Gender and Gender-Based Violence, Sexuality, and Reproductive Health.

The implementing partner was also responsible for the provision of teaching and learning resources: curriculum guides, students’ workbooks, brochures, flyers, charts, and DVDs. Facilitators participated in workshops of two to four days, focused on the use of the curriculum. Health educators from the Guyana Responsible Parent Association conducted sessions on sexual and reproductive health. These workshops, funded by UNFPA, were held between 2008 and 2013. However, the exploratory evaluation of the program in this paper refers to the 2008-2012 period.

The research questions that guided the exploratory evaluation are:

1. To what extent is the sexual and reproductive health and gender-based education integrated into the curricula of technical and vocational institutions?
2. What are students’ and facilitators’ perceptions of the sexual and reproductive health and gender-based education?
3. Are there differences in the perceptions of students and facilitators in relation to the sexual and reproductive health and gender-based education?
4. What is the nature of the support given to the implementation of the sexual and reproductive health and gender-based education by administrators of technical and vocational institutions?

### Research Related to Curriculum Innovation

Research on curriculum innovation indicates that change is a developmental process that takes time (Hall, 1979). Research studies also suggest that there are several perspectives related to educational change: rational-scientific/R&D, political perspective, and the cultural perspective (Sashkin & Egermeier, 1993). Researchers have also identified some typical stages through which innovations progress: initiation, development, and adoption; implementation, sustainability, and dissemination (Scheirer, 2005). However, there is no linear progression from one stage to the next. Some research suggests that implementation and sustainability are often parallel processes that occur concomitantly and that they are affected by similar program activities (Scheirer, 2005).

In addition, some research suggests that several factors may have an impact on the implementation and sustainability of a new program. These factors include strong advocacy for the program (Samuels et al., 2013), qualified personnel and teachers' beliefs about their ability, administrative support and adequate resources (Fullan & Miles, 1992; Patterson, 1997; Sparks, 1988; Weiler, Pigg, & McDermott, 2003). Furthermore, programs can be sustained depending on the extent to which they can be modified to adapt to the organization (Bergman & McLaughlin, 1977; Hall, 1979; O'Donnell, 2008; Scheirer, 2005; Shediach-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998), as well as the extent to which stakeholders believe in the benefits provided by the program (Scheirer, 2005). Barriers to implementation and sustainability include inadequate time and rapid teacher/facilitator turnover (Friend, Flattun, Simpson, Nederhoff, & Neumark-Sztainer, 2014).

## Methodology

### Data Collection

Data were collected in the following ways:

Document review of annual reports and workshop registers of the implementing partner in order to get background information on the program.

Telephone interviews were conducted with program facilitators to determine whether they were still involved with the program.

Questionnaire administered to facilitators and former students for data on course content and organization, fidelity of implementation, training of facilitators, benefits to students, and resources. The questionnaires contained closed-ended questions and one opened-ended question which allowed respondents to state how they benefitted from the program.

Semi-structured face-to-face interviews with administrators of the relevant institutions.

### Population and Sample

The population in this study comprised students and facilitators from technical and vocational institutions, both rural and urban, that had agreed to integrate the sexuality education program into their curricula.

Thirty (30) students who had completed the sexuality education program offered by one participating institution, the Board of Industrial Training at one of its training sites on the West Coast of Berbice, prior to 2012, were asked to complete the students' questionnaire. These were the students who were accessible at the time of data collection. Seventy-seven percent of these students are between the ages of 15 to 22. A majority (24) of the students are female and 27 of these students completed secondary school.

Fifty-eight persons who responded to telephone calls comprised the facilitators' sample for the telephone interview. A convenience sample of 16 facilitators, who were attending a workshop, responded to the facilitator's questionnaire. A majority (10) of the facilitators who responded to the questionnaire are female. In addition, a representative from the Ministry of Education and administrators of five participating institutions made up the sample.

### **Data Analysis**

To determine the extent to which the sexuality education program was integrated into the curricula of institutions, the researcher analyzed data from document reviews, telephone interviews, surveys, and semi-structured interviews. Quantitative analyses included tallying, calculating mean, t-tests, and chi square. Means were calculated for the factors of facilitators' and students' perceptions. T-tests and chi square tests were conducted to explore differences in perceptions of facilitators and students. The researcher conducted content analysis for semi-structured interview transcripts and open-ended responses on the facilitators' and students' questionnaires.

### **Results: The Extent to Which the Sexuality Education Program Is Integrated Into Technical and Vocational Institutions**

**Participating institutions.** The annual reports and other records of the implementing partner in the program provided a general picture of the number of institutions that had indicated an interest in participating in sexual and reproductive health and gender-based education, their location, and the number and gender of facilitators trained (Table 1 and Figure 1). Between 2008 and 2010, 79 people from 15 organizations/institutions participated in training to facilitate the sexuality education program. Six of these institutions are formal state-owned educational institutions. The number of institutions increased by four in 2010, which included one faith-based organization. The majority of these institutions carry out their activities primarily in urban areas.

Most of the facilitators trained between 2008 and 2010 are from two institutions, Adult Education Association (24%) and Board of Industrial Training (24%) (Figure 1). Both are nonformal institutions and have the potential to reach a wide cross section of young people outside of the formal education system. In addition, there is a preponderance of female facilitators (71%).

**Table 1**

Participating institutions

Institution	Area of Activity		No. of Facilitators Trained 2008-2009	No. of Facilitators Trained 2010	Total 2008-2010
	Urban	Rural			
Adult Education Association (AEA)	•	•	12	7	19
Board of Industrial Training (BIT)	•	•	15	4	19
Young Women's Christian Association (YWCA)	•		3	2	5
Critchlow Labour College	•		4	–	4
Guyana Industrial Training Centre (GITC)	•		2	–	2
Carnegie School of Home Economics (CSHE)	•		2	2	4
Technical and Vocational Education Council (TVET)			2	–	2
Ministry of Youth and Culture Skills Training Centre		•	4	–	4
Institute of Distance and Continuing Education	•		7	–	7
Guyana Youth Business Trust	•		1	1	2
Government Technical Institute (GTI)	•		3	–	3
New Amsterdam Technical Institute (NATI)	•		–	2	2
Essequibo Technical Institute (ETI)		•	–	2	2
Linden Technical Institute (LTI)	•		–	2	2
Roadside Baptist Skills Training		•	–	2	2
<b>Total 15</b>					<b>79</b>

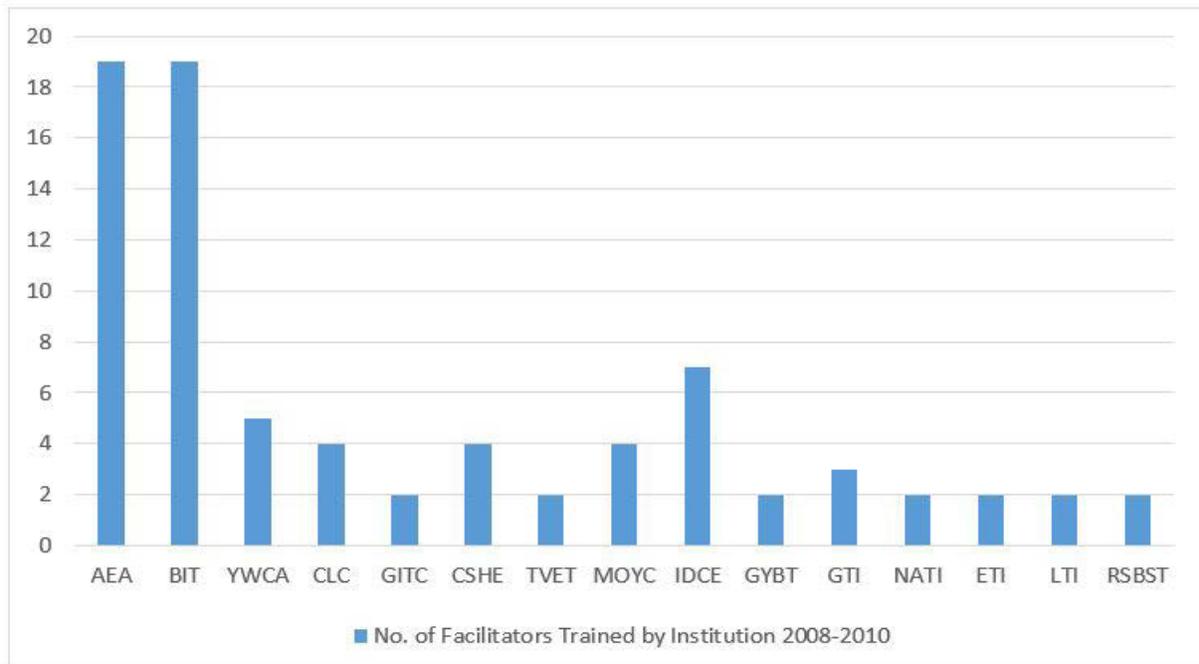


Fig. 1: Facilitators trained

**Facilitators who are actually teaching the course.** Telephone interviews conducted with 58 of the facilitators who had been trained revealed that only 15 (26%) of them were actually teaching the course at the time of the interview. The main reasons given by facilitators for not teaching the course are that it is not offered by the participating institution (48%) or they are no longer employed by a participating institution (32%). A few of the facilitators had migrated to other countries, while others claimed that they had not been asked to teach the course. However, several facilitators indicated that even though their institution did not formally offer the course, they use the knowledge and skills acquired from the training to counsel students or conduct informal sessions with their class or other groups and individuals in their community.

### Results of the Facilitators' Questionnaire Survey

**Institutions offering the sexuality education program and the mode of its delivery.** First, the survey sought to find out whether sexuality education is offered at the institutions with which the facilitators are affiliated, and if the course is offered, how it is scheduled. Facilitators were also asked to identify the mode of delivery of the course and the time allocated for teaching the course. The results of the facilitators' survey reveal that a minority, four (4) out of the eleven (11) institutions to which they belong, offer sexuality education. The institutions identified as not offering the course are the same as those identified by the respondents of the telephone interview.

Of the facilitators who indicated that their institutions offer the course, a majority (75%) said that the course was offered as a separate subject/distinct module. These facilitators belong to two institutions, the Board of Industrial Training and the Adult Education Association. Other facilitators (25%) indicated that some of the course content is integrated into other subjects. On average, two to three hours per week is allocated for teaching the course and it is delivered via the face-to-face modality.

**Facilitators' perceptions of sexuality education.** The facilitators' questionnaire included questions related to critical aspects of the course, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Gender Based Education.

The categories of interest are (Figure 2):

- Content of the course
- Fidelity/implementation of the course
- Organization of the course
- Training of facilitators
- Benefits of the course to students
- Impact of the course on students
- Materials/resources

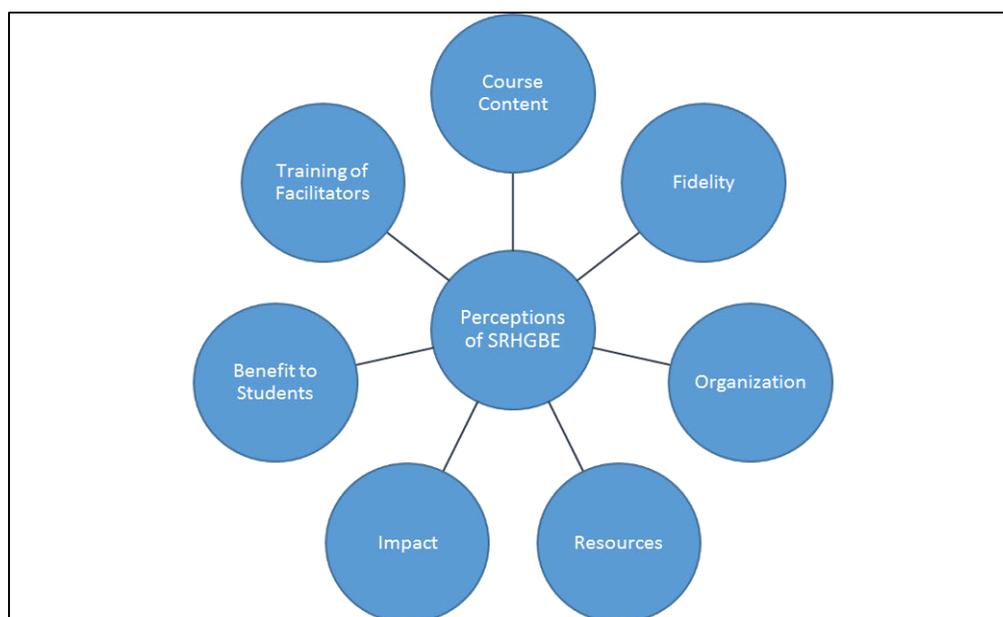


Fig. 2: Facilitators' perceptions

The mean scores of responses in the various categories outlined in the facilitators' questionnaire are shown in Table 2 below.

**Table 2**

Mean score on variables\*

Variable/Category	No. of Items	Mean Score
Content of course	5	3.5
Fidelity	2	3.1
Organization of the course	3	3.3
Training of facilitators	3	3
Benefit of course to students	5	3.3
Impact of course on students	3	3.3
Materials/resources	3	3.2

\*Rating scale used was 1 to 4, with 1 being the least favourable and 4 being the most favourable.

**Course content** examines the degree to which facilitators were satisfied with the content of the course, including its appropriateness and relevance for students' needs. As the mean (on a scale of 1 to 4) indicates, the facilitators generally gave very positive responses (mean = 3.5). The most positive responses relate to the up-to-date nature of the course content (mean = 3.6) and the appropriateness of the course content for adolescents (mean = 3.6). The lowest mean of the category relates to the appropriateness of the course content for students of diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds (mean = 3.3). On the whole, respondents are very satisfied with the course content.

**Fidelity** examines the degree to which facilitators implemented the course in the way it was intended. There were two items in this category which sought to find out whether the course was implemented the way it was laid out in the course module and whether facilitators found it difficult to implement the course. The mean suggests that most facilitators have given relatively positive responses (mean = 3.1). The lowest mean of the category relates to whether facilitators implemented the course the way it was laid out in the module (mean = 2.9). This mean suggests that several facilitators (38%) reported they did not implement the course in the way it was intended.

**Organization of the course** examines the degree to which facilitators were satisfied with the objectives of the course and the organization of the course content, including flexibility to adapt content to meet students' needs. The mean score suggests that facilitators have generally given positive responses (mean = 3.3). The most positive mean relates to satisfaction that the course is organized in such a way that it is easy to understand and deliver (mean = 3.5), while the lowest mean score corresponds with the ability to adapt the curriculum to meet students' needs (mean = 3.2).

**Training refers** to facilitators' perceptions of the adequacy of the training they received to facilitate the course, in terms of the knowledge/content acquired and the duration of the training. As the mean score indicates, facilitators have generally given a moderately positive response (mean = 3). They were satisfied that the training equipped them with adequate skills/teaching strategies to facilitate the course and this item received the highest mean score of the category (mean = 3.4). However, a significant number (50%) felt that the time set aside for training was inadequate and this item received the lowest mean score of the category (mean = 2.6).

**Benefits** refer to facilitators' perceptions of how students benefitted from the course in terms of knowledge and skills acquired and attitude formation. The mean score shows that facilitators have given positive responses (mean = 3.3). The most positive mean is related to satisfaction that the course gave students opportunities to interact and share ideas and opinions (mean = 3.5). The lowest mean of the category seems to indicate that facilitators have a moderately favourable perception that the knowledge and skills students acquired led to changes in their behaviour (mean = 3.1). Generally, facilitators feel that students have benefitted from the course. Another area of interest was finding out facilitators' perceptions of the **impact** of the course on students. As the mean score indicates, facilitators have given positive responses (mean = 3.3). The most positive mean corresponds to satisfaction that the course promoted open discussion among students (mean = 3.5), while the lowest mean score relates to the impact of the course on students' attitudes (mean = 3.2).

The final area of interest was, **materials**, provided for the course in terms of its relevance, user friendliness, and cost. Again, the mean score is good (mean = 3.2). There was one negative item in the category, which stated that the materials were expensive to reproduce. As the mean indicates, the facilitators disagreed with this position (mean = 2.8). The highest mean of the category relates to satisfaction that the materials were relevant to the course content (mean = 3.5).

Facilitators were also asked to indicate the extent to which a range of resources/materials are available for teaching the course. The rating scale used was 1 to 4, with 1 being the least available and 4 the most available. The means show that, the resources/materials that are least available for use are audiovisual formats such as DVDs (mean = 1.4) and CDs (mean = 1.5), computer with Internet access (mean = 2.1), and up-to-date text books and reference materials (mean = 2.4). The module, Framework for Integrating Sexual & Reproductive Health & Gender Based Education, seems to be the most readily available resource for facilitators (mean = 3.2).

### **Results of Facilitators' Open-ended Question: Benefits of Sexuality Education**

The qualitative analyses indicated that a majority of the facilitators felt that the program equipped them with the knowledge and skills needed to teach the course. They seem to have gained a lot of self-efficacy regarding their ability to deliver the curriculum. The statements below reflect this view:

*This course has widened my knowledge ... and I'm equipped to deal with my students.*

*This course ... was very informative in terms of what is happening in the society and among our young people. This will cause [help] us to understand how to deal [work] with youths.*

*I have learnt how to relate to students on a one-on-one basis. I have been given an abundance of information to use in [training] sessions.*

Some facilitators explained that the course brought about a change in their attitude to issues relating to sexuality. Other facilitators explained that they are more tolerant of people who are different from them. It seems as if some facilitators have begun to examine their beliefs and change the way in which they interact with their students:

*As a person, it [the course] has change[d] my thinking of certain aspects, especially lesbians and gays. I will be more tolerant and seek to understand the person before making decisions.*

*I have learnt ... and to be more tolerant when dealing with others.*

*I became a changed individual. I became more accommodating.*

### **Results of the Students' Questionnaire Survey: Students' Perceptions of Sexuality Education**

The student's questionnaire included questions concerning critical aspects of the course, Sexual and Reproductive Health and Gender Based Education. The categories of interest are (Figure 3):

- Content of the course
- Materials
- Benefits of the course to students/participants
- Impact of the course on students/participants

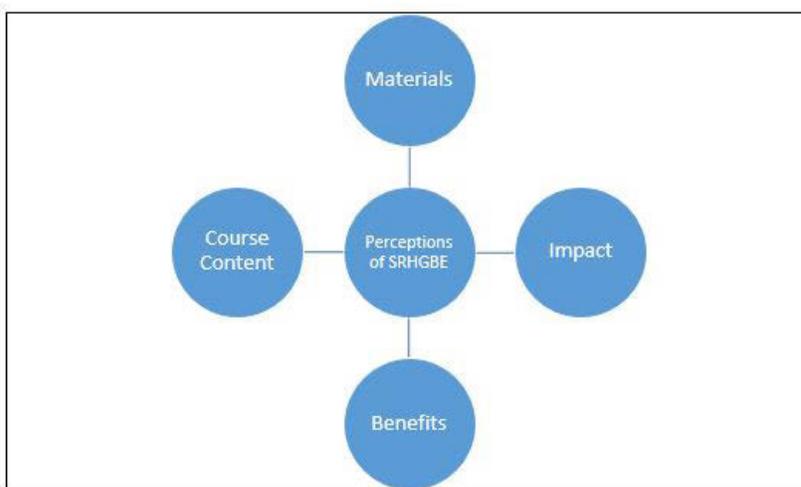


Fig. 3 Students' perceptions

The mean scores of responses in the various categories outlined in the students' questionnaire are presented in Table 3.

**Table 3**

Mean score on variables\*

Variable/Category	Number of Items	Mean
Content of course	4	3.5
Materials	2	3.1
Benefits	5	3.2
Impact	3	3.8

\*Rating scale used was 1 to 4, with 1 being the least favourable and 4 the most favourable.

**Course content** examines the degree to which students were satisfied with the course content. The mean score (on a scale of 1 to 4) shows that students generally have given very positive responses (mean = 3.5). The most positive response relates to satisfaction that the issues addressed by the course were relevant to the needs of all students (mean = 3.7). The lowest mean of the category relates to suitability of the content for adolescents (mean = 2.9). A minority of the respondent (20%) did not feel that the content was always suitable for adolescents. Overall, respondents are satisfied with the course content.

Another area of interest was respondents' perceptions of the **materials** used to conduct the course. The mean score suggests that respondents gave relatively positive responses (mean = 3.2). The highest mean of the category relates to satisfaction with the relevance of the materials to the course content (mean = 3.6). Respondents were obviously very satisfied that the materials were relevant to the course content. However, respondents were not entirely satisfied that the materials were always user-friendly (mean = 2.8).

**Benefits** refer to students' perceptions of how they benefitted from the course in terms of knowledge and skills gained and attitude formation. As the mean score shows, responses were overall relatively positive (mean = 3.2). Students were very satisfied that the knowledge and skills they acquired contributed to a change in attitudes (mean = 3.7). The lowest mean of the category relates to the idea that the course gave students adequate knowledge and skills to make decisions about their reproductive rights (mean = 2.7). This mean suggests that students are not entirely satisfied or convinced that they acquired enough knowledge and skills to make decisions about their reproductive rights.

The survey also sought to find out students' perceptions of the **impact** that the course had on them. The mean score shows that students gave very positive responses (mean = 3.8). The highest means were in relation to satisfaction that the course had a positive impact on their attitude (mean = 3.8) and that the course promoted open discussion among students (mean = 3.8). There was also satisfaction among

students that they now know much more about their sexual and reproductive rights and gender violence than when the course began (mean = 3.7).

Students were also asked to indicate the extent to which a range of resources were available for use during the course. The scale used was 1 to 4, with 1 being the least available and 4 being the most available. The means indicate that the materials/resources that the students felt were least used were multimedia projector (mean = 1.4), CDs (mean = 1.5), DVDs (mean = 1.5), videos (mean = 1.5), computer with Internet access (mean = 2.1), and charts and pictures (mean = 2.2). The students felt that the resources that were available were up-to-date books and reference materials (mean = 3.3) and the module Framework for Integrating SRH&GBE (mean = 3.1). Their perception was similar to that of the facilitators.

### **Are There Significant Differences in the Perceptions of Facilitators and Students in Relation to Sexuality Education?**

The data permitted an analysis of the relationship between facilitators' and students' perceptions of the following aspects/variables of the course:

- Course content
- Materials
- Benefits of the course to students
- Impact of course on students

The chi square test was used to determine whether there were significant differences in the perceptions of facilitators and students as it relates to the four aspects of the course shown above. The chi square test revealed that there are no significant differences in the perceptions of facilitators and students as it relates to course content, resources used, benefits, and impact of the course on students ( $\chi^2 = 0.0346$ ,  $p = .05$ ). That is, overall facilitators and students perceived those aspects of the course the same way. Further analysis was done to determine if there were significant differences in the perceptions of facilitators and students with regard to the following item: *The course had a positive effect on students' attitude*. The T-Test revealed that there was a significant difference in the perceptions of facilitators and students as it relates to the item above ( $t = 2.31$ ,  $p = .05$ ). Namely, students felt much more strongly than their facilitators that the course had a positive effect on them.

### **Results of Students' Open-Ended Question: Benefits of Sexuality Education**

The qualitative analyses of students' responses bolstered the earlier finding that students felt strongly that they had acquired more knowledge, particularly about their sexual and reproductive health, as a result of the course. Others indicated that they developed skills, including decision making and communication:

*I know more about my body. And can share with others.*

*I learnt more about my sexual [and] reproductive health and how to practice safe sex.*

*I am able to make wise choices.*

*I have learnt to be more open when speaking on matters pertaining to SRH [sexual and reproductive health] issues.*

*One student even felt that the course had brought about a change of attitude: I changed my attitude towards sexuality.*

## **Administrative Support for Sexuality Education**

The interviews with administrators of technical and vocational institutions and the Deputy Chief Education Officer (Technical) of the Ministry of Education revealed that a majority (4 out of 6) of these administrators were aware of the new sexuality education program. Interestingly, one administrator who was unaware of the program, had two trained facilitators affiliated with that institution.

The Ministry of Education's role in implementing the program was limited to helping the Adult Education Association organize training for facilitators. Moreover, it was found that the Ministry of Education has no documented policy on sexuality education at the postsecondary level. The one commonality across the five administrators and the Education Officer interviewed, was that they all agreed that sexuality education should be integrated into the curricula of technical and vocational institutions.

## **Discussion**

This study adds to our understanding of the challenges and opportunities related to implementing and sustaining curriculum reform. One key finding is that after much investment in time and financial resources in the training of facilitators and the development of the curriculum, sexuality education was not integrated into the curricula of most of the participating technical and vocational institutions. In this study, a majority of the facilitators are not teaching the course and even fewer institutions are offering sexuality education, either as a stand-alone course or integrated into other courses. This result is not completely surprising, as prior research has found that many of the curriculum reforms attempted in education have not been sustained. Numerous explanations have been offered for this state of affairs.

From the facilitators' perspective, the foremost reason for them not teaching the course was that the institution did not offer it. But, facilitator turnover was another reason for the unsustainability of the course. In fact, a significant number of the facilitators are no longer employed by a participating institution. Migration to another country also had a minor impact on the reduction in the number of persons available to facilitate the course. In their study, Friend and colleagues (2014) identified teacher turnover as an important barrier to effective implementation and sustainability of new programs. This finding suggests that developers of curriculum reform should plan for ongoing training and support of teachers/facilitators if the innovation is to be sustained (Berman & McLaughlin, 1977). In addition, decisions about the sustainability of innovations, including ongoing training, should be made early in the development stage of a project so that administrators at the district (Ministry of Education) and school levels can be prepared for their roles when the project is implemented.

However, some facilitators were able to adapt the new curriculum to suit the environment in which they work. Even though their institution was not offering the course in sexuality education, they reported that they used the course content and skills gained from the training in other ways: to counsel students, have informal discussions with their class and other groups and individuals in their community, and integrate the content into other courses. Like this finding, prior studies have found that: new programs are implemented and sustained depending on the extent to which they can be modified by stakeholders to adapt to their organization; there can be sustainability for at least some aspects of the program; and sustainability may occur at levels other than the organizational level, including the individual level (Hall, 1979; Scheirer, 2005; Shediak-Rizkallah & Bone, 1998). Further, Berman and McLaughlin (1977) argue also that the implementation of a new project could be seen as effective if “mutual adaptation” occurs, in which the project is adapted to its institutional context. Thus, a practical implication of this study is that evaluators of curriculum reform should not conclude that a project has failed just because the innovation is not sustained in its original form.

The findings of this study suggest that the developers of the sexuality education program underestimated the role of administrators in the successful implementation and sustainability of new programs. In the case of the formal institutions, even though the Deputy Chief Education Officer (Technical) was aware of the new program, little effort was made to ensure that a policy decision on sexuality education in postsecondary institutions was taken by the Ministry of Education. Without this policy directive from the Ministry of Education, very few administrators at the institution/school level would be inclined to “disrupt” their programs in order to integrate a new course. The absence of a policy directive from the Ministry of Education suggests that there might be a lack of commitment on their part for the long-term stability of the new program. Bergman and McLaughlin (1977) contend that early and continued support from district managers is an important factor in the implementation and sustainability of new projects. Moreover, McLaughlin (1990) explains that stakeholder commitment to a new initiative can occur after mandated involvement once there is administrative support.

Administrative support for new projects is important for another reason. As prior studies have shown, administrators can create the organizational climate of acceptance for the innovation in their institutions (Bergman & McLaughlin, 1977). Administrators who are supportive of new initiatives are often willing to make scheduling and staffing decisions that include the class or course involved (Friend et al., 2014; Scheirer, 2005). The administrator therefore plays a crucial role as the “gatekeeper of change” (Bergman & McLaughlin, 1977). As several facilitators in this study have pointed out, no provision was made by the administrators of their institution for scheduling the course and they were never asked to teach it. The lesson to be learnt here is that administrative support for a new initiative is vital to its chances of success.

Samuels et al. (2013) suggest that advocacy, which includes activities and interventions aimed at raising awareness and building support and ownership, is critical for the successful implementation and continuation of sexuality education programs. The results of the study being reported here reveal that some administrators of technical and vocational institutions were unaware of the new sexuality education program. It is therefore inconceivable that these stakeholders would support and take ownership of a program they know little or nothing about. However, stakeholders’ awareness and support for new

projects seldom occur by chance. Advocacy has to be planned for and should be ongoing as stakeholders need to be continually brought on board to own the project (Samuels et al., 2013).

Further, this study found that both facilitators and students have a positive perception of the course, particularly as it relates to the knowledge and skills they acquired and the impact it had on attitude formation and instructional practices. This finding suggests that facilitators are receptive to the idea of sexuality education and this is good for future efforts to integrate sexuality education into the curricula of technical and vocational institutions. Research has found that high levels of self-efficacy among teachers usually means that they are willing to take risks and participate in the change process (Sparks, 1988). In addition, researchers suggest that change is likely to occur when people inside the school examine their beliefs and change their instructional practices to suit their revised beliefs (Patterson, 1997; Sashkin & Egermeier, 1993). This finding suggests also that the program did achieve some of the objectives identified by UNESCO (2009) for effective sexuality education: to increase knowledge, develop skills, and clarify attitudes among young people.

### **Limitation and Conclusions**

This paper provided useful insights into the challenges and possibilities of integrating sexuality education into the curricula of technical and vocational institutions in Guyana. It highlights the importance of administrative support in the implementation and continuation of curriculum innovation. It also reminds evaluators that a deeper examination of innovations that appear to have failed, may reveal that teachers and students often adapt innovations to their peculiar needs and circumstances. However, some of its findings may not be relevant in other contexts, since the sample of facilitators and students was limited and may not be representative of the broader population. Nonetheless, the findings provide some evidence that the challenges of integrating sexuality education into the curricula of technical and vocational institutions are not insurmountable.

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# The Essential Role of Play in School Contexts for the Well-Being of Children

Sandra J. Stone

## Abstract

This article affirms the essential role of play for the well-being of children within the school context. The article explores the definition of play, why play is so important, gives examples of play in schools, and advocates for a child-centered approach to learning. The downside of a curriculum-centered approach is explored as an agent of anti-well-being for children. Standards and standardized tests are toxic to children's healthy growth and development, crowding out or eliminating play from schools. The article advocates for a place for play in schools in order to promote the well-being of every child.

## The Essential Role of Play in School Contexts for the Well-Being of Children

Play is essential for *all* children. It is not just important, a good thing to provide for children, an enjoyable experience for children—it is LIFE ESSENTIAL for children! A NECESSITY for the **well-being** of children!

In the 1800s, John Dewey, the father of progressive education in the United States, criticized the factory model approach to education, which controlled schooling in the 19th century. Schools became the instrument for preparing children to fit into an industrialized society (Stone, 2004). Dewey (1938) described this approach as “mechanical,” with uniform curriculum and methods. He was genuinely concerned about the “well-being of children” who became “products” on the conveyor belt of education, instead of unique and valued individuals. Now in the 21st century, some types of schooling are still manipulating children as products instead of individuals; schooling, for some, is not about children learning and meeting the needs of the whole child, but it is narrowed to prescribed “standards” in a corporate modeling of education with expressed goals that do not include the “well-being” of children. The impact of standards-based education and the accompanying benchmarks of approved learning and standardized, high-stakes testing, polarizes some education models into a frigid zone which does not allow children to thrive as learners and human beings, and certainly does not value the well-being of the child in the school context. Miller and Almon (2011) agree that this approach with its “uniformity and mechanistic perfection” is inappropriate and that a “mechanical view of the human being cannot succeed” (p. 3).

Diane Ravitch (2010) states that, “schools will surely be failures if students graduate knowing how to choose the right option from four bubbles on a multiple-choice test, but unprepared to lead fulfilling lives . . .” (p. 224). She begs the question as to what do we want for our children when we send them to school? Do we want them to think of schooling as places of “drudgery, worksheets, test preparation, and test taking?” (p. 231). Educators and physicians are concerned about increasing the stress children are

experiencing in schools and agree that the “outcomes of this hurried curriculum are unhealthy” (Miller & Almon, 2011, p. 1).

Gray (2011) sees a sharp decline of play in the past 50 years and conversely, a sharp rise of psychopathology in children. As play, especially outdoor play, has declined, “anxiety, depression, feelings of helplessness, and narcissism” (p. 443) have increased. Gray argues that without play, children “fail to acquire the social and emotional skills necessary for healthy psychological development” (p. 444). Gray agrees that one of the causes of a decline in children’s play is the change in schools to more adult-directed academics and less recess time or none at all. He is concerned that the decline in play is directly related to a “decline in children’s mental health” (p. 453). Indoor, outdoor, and nature play all support children’s overall well-being (Dowdell, Gray, & Malone, 2011), yet play is being pushed out of our schools in favor of teacher-led, curriculum-centered approaches (Almon, 2013).

The questions to consider are: Do we want more from our schools? More importantly, do we want more for our children from schools? Do we want places where children can flourish, to be healthy and grow well? Is our children’s well-being important to us? Do we want them to be happy, secure, safe, and cared for? Do we want them to experience the joy of learning and the fulfilment of life? Are we willing to sacrifice our children’s well-being for arbitrarily determined academic success defined by test scores? Unfortunately, many schools are cutting back on children’s play, or eliminating it all together in order to boost test scores (Chmelynski, 2006; Graue, 2010; Levin, 2012; Neason, 2015). Strong affirmation of the essential role of play in the school context for the well-being of children is imperative.

## **Play and Well-Being**

As educators, the underlying foundation for schooling should be the utmost care for children and their well-being. The *well-being* of children means that the child is healthy, well, whole in his or her entire being—physically, socially, emotionally, and cognitively, not just an absence of disease (Humberstone, 2009). The Association for Childhood Education International (ACEI) embraces the role of play in children’s lives and their sense of well-being. ACEI “believes that play – a dynamic, active, and constructive behavior – is an essential and integral part of all children’s healthy growth, development, and learning across all ages, domains and cultures” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p. 33). Research (Burriss & Tsao, 2002; Carlsson-Paige, 2008; Copple & Bredekamp, 2009; Dickey, Castle, & Pryor, 2016; Elkind, 2007; Fiorelli & Russ, 2012) supports the relationship of play to life’s satisfaction and the role of play for children’s overall well-being. Play is recognized as an indispensable element in child development and a critical ingredient in a child’s education (Frost, 1992). The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) supports play as essential for developmentally appropriate practices in schools (Copple & Bredekamp, 2009). The Alliance for Children expresses concern for the decline in children’s health and well-being and the endangerment of childhood itself (Miller & Almon, 2009). So, if play is essential to children’s “well-being,” then it demands our attention and our advocacy to provide for play within the school context. We cannot rob our children of this “valuable resource for optimal growth and learning” (Carlsson-Page, 2008, p. 44). We cannot trade our substantive research

about children and learning for an approach that is not grounded in the principles of child development (Jachyra & Fusco, 2016; Miller & Almon, 2011).

## Definition of Play

Children's play can be misunderstood, particularly play in the school context. Active learning may be labeled "play" when actually it is teacher-directed active learning—which is good—but it is not play. Play (Johnson, Christie, & Wardle, 2005; Stone, 1993, 1995) is defined as *intrinsically motivated* where children pursue play for their own satisfaction, learning, and needs. Something or someone is not leading, guiding, or directing the play experience. *Choice* is another attribute of play where children choose to play, how to play, and with whom to play. The child is in control of the play experience, not an adult. If the experience is assigned or chosen for the child, then actual play may not unfold.

Play is *not goal-oriented*. The process of play is more important to the child than the product of play. A goal is not the object of play, even if a goal is achieved. The absence of a goal *frees* children to try many different variations of the experience, which is why play tends to be more flexible than goal-oriented behavior. Play provides for multiple possibilities for divergent thinking.

Some types of play are *non-literal*. The reality the child creates within himself or herself takes precedence over external reality. For example, a block is a block of wood in reality. In play, the child changes reality into what he or she wants the block to stand for. He or she may choose the wooden block to stand for a car, a slice of pizza, or even a space ship.

And, finally, play is *enjoyable*. Play is self-satisfying, pleasurable, and important to the child. One can observe children playing and can see a range of expression from quiet contentment to exuberant laughter.

Understanding what play is clarifies what types of learning environments should be created and promoted which are inclusive of true play.

## Why Play Is So Important for School Contexts

Why is play so important? Couldn't we just eliminate play from children's lives, particularly their school lives, by replacing recess and classroom play centers and projects with skill and study work? Shouldn't we get on with things society places great importance on, such as working hard, being responsible, following directions, and getting good scores on standardized tests? Surely play in schools could not lead to those goals!

Interestingly, child development experts, theorists, and researchers are in agreement that play is essential in the lives of children and that the *absence of play* presents a roadblock to the development of healthy, creative individuals (Dickey et al., 2016; Gray, 2011; Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002; Sandberg & Heden, 2011; Wenner, 2009). Even recess is under attack with a call to eliminate it or replace it with teacher-directed physical education. However, we know that recess uniquely provides for the creative, social and emotional development of children (Ramstetter, Murray, & Garner, 2010). Authors (Elkind, 1982;

Postman, 1982; Winn, 1981) have written about what they call “the disappearance of childhood.” As Wasserman (1992) states, “children today have far fewer opportunities to live in the life of the mind, to be playful, to behave as children” (p. 203). Schooling occurs during a child’s most important waking hours of the day, occupying almost 60% of a child’s daily time. Why should play be considered essential for a prized place in the school day?

Consider, for example, why experts explain the importance of play. According to Isenberg and Quisenberry (2002),

*psychoanalysts* believe that play is necessary for mastering emotional traumas or disturbances; *psychosocialists* believe it is necessary for ego mastery and learning to live with everyday experiences; *constructivists* believe it is necessary for cognitive growth; *maturationalists* believe it is necessary for competence building and for socializing functions in all cultures of the world; and *neuroscientists* believe it is necessary for emotional and physical health, motivation, and love of learning. (p. 33)

Choice and control over their play gives children a sense of autonomy (Masten, 2001). Children, through play, develop a sense of control over their own lives and are less likely to become anxious or depressed (Gray, 2011). Children who are able to express emotion in their play, “feel happier, more energetic, and more cheerful . . .” (Fiorelli & Russ, 2012, p. 100). Play is also key to supporting the development of emotional resiliency in children and gives children a resource for meeting adversity, and for increasing their chances of survival (Fearn, & Howard, 2012). Play gives children the capacities for self-control, which is crucial to social existence (Gray, 2011; Vygotsky, 1976). Children learn to control their emotions through play, make friends, and learn to get along with others (Gray, 2011). Play contexts afford children the opportunity to feel joy, passion, and creativity as well as to develop their own identity, self-esteem and sense of self (Sandberg & Heden, 2011).

Gray (2011) states:

Somehow, as a society, we have come to the conclusion that to protect children from danger and to educate them, we must deprive them of the very activity that makes them happiest and place them for ever more hours in settings where they are more or less continually directed and evaluated by adults, settings almost designed to produce anxiety and depression. If we wish children to be happy and to grow up to become socially and emotionally fulfilled and competent adults, we must provide them, once again with opportunities to spend many hours per day playing freely with friends. (p. 458)

If we want to support the healthy development of a child, to nurture their well-being, then *play is essential!* Play ensures children’s well-being and development (Russell & Lester, 2009). If we want children to grow up to be psychologically healthy and competent adults, the best gift, and essential gift, we can give our children is free play.

## Play in School Contexts

Recently, an early childhood teacher said, “I don’t have a dramatic play area in my classroom because the children are too noisy, but I don’t know what to do with the children because they are crawling on the floor pretending to be cats! Can someone help me?” Unfortunately, the teacher was equating a quiet, controlled classroom to one in which children are “learning” in the traditional sense, not realizing she had built a barrier to children’s “real” learning. For example, research demonstrates that a dramatic play area supports children using more elaborate language (Pellegrini, 1984; Reynolds, Stagnitti, & Kidd, 2011), greater story comprehension (Christie, 1987), and story recall (Silvern, Taylor, Williamson, Surbeck, & Kelley, 1986). In addition, this type of play gives opportunities for children to develop friendships, express their feelings, and also learn about negotiating, resolving conflicts, fairness and competition (Stone, 1993).

For some reason educators have equated “learning” to goal-oriented worksheets, which lead the children through a sequence of curriculum in a linear fashion. Playing, then, is not “real” learning because it is outside the framework of the sequenced, standardized curriculum. Teachers often feel compelled or required to cover that curriculum in order to “teach” the children the prescribed curriculum. In this sense, some schooling models have chosen a curriculum-centered approach to learning, instead of a child-centered approach.

Dewey (1938), the originator of the term “child-centered,” was concerned with the overall well-being of children. He wanted educators to consider children in the process of educating them. He could see that a uniform curriculum was not a good fit for children and their needs. Play, on the other hand, is a natural learning opportunity for children, which also protects, supports, and nurtures their well-being. The following are actual play examples, which demonstrate the deep learning that takes place through play, which you cannot teach with a worksheet or a curriculum-centered approach.

**Negotiation.** Two children, ages five and six, entered the home center at almost the same time. The first child announced, “I’m the mom!” The second child said, “No, I’m the mom!” The first child said, “I’m the mom. I was here first.” The second child pleaded with a very sad face, “But, I want to be the mom.” The first child, recognizing her dismay, responded, “OK, I’ll be the mom first and you can be the mom second.” *You can’t teach that with a worksheet!*

**Cognitive Planning.** A group of five-, six-, and seven-year-olds arranged chairs in the mixed-age classroom and then sat in the chairs, motioning that they were driving someplace. The teacher watched as the children organized the chairs in rows, had given roles to each other, and were obviously playing out a story. The teacher’s curiosity led her to ask the children what they were doing. They responded that they were all in a motor home on their way to Las Vegas for two of the children to get married. Apparently, one of the children experienced this real-life event with her family. The mental organization of the story was played out meticulously. *You can’t teach that with a worksheet!*

**Problem-solving.** A five-year-old was involved in constructive play at the art center. She was building a tower with wooden blocks and gluing them together. She discovered that the glue was slippery and the

blocks were sliding out from one another. This was a problem for her. She looked over to another table and saw a tape dispenser. As quickly as she could, she left her project, got the tape, and secured her tower. Then she applied tape all over the tower to keep the blocks together while the glue dried. She solved the problem. *You can't teach that with a worksheet!*

**Imagination.** A five-year-old was playing with other children at the home center. As they played “school,” the center table was covered with several pencils and paper. As the other children left, the five-year-old sat alone and began to put the pencils in between his fingers. He then put the pencils down, left the center, and returned quickly with more pencils, again, putting them between his fingers. Slowly and quietly, the child motioned with his hands and pencils the claws he created and transformed himself into the character, Wolverine. What a remarkable transformation of imagination. *You can't teach that with a worksheet!*

**Friendship.** Two three-year-olds were playing together in their preschool. One child had decided to decorate himself with colored strips of paper. The other child saw what he was doing and decided to help him accomplish this project. Carefully, he provided strips of paper and tape to put on his playmate. After some time, the decorated child asked his playmate, “Why are you doing this for me?” The child responded, “Because you are my friend, silly!” *You can't teach that with a worksheet!*

We know that when children play together, they are free to “define goals, plan, solve problems, negotiate and coordinate their behavior” (Ramani, 2012, p. 163) to sustain their play and reach shared goals. Play provides an arena of learning for the whole child: cognitive, social, emotional, and physical well-being (Dickey et al., 2016; Stone, 1995). Nancy Carlsson-Paige describes play as “an engine driving children to build ideas, learn skills and develop capacities they need in life . . . In play children develop problem solving skills, social and emotional awareness, self-regulation, imagination and inner resilience” (Ravitch, 2016). Play is child-driven, sophisticated, complex, dynamic, flexible, and personal, all within a context that is rewarding, safe, and full of possibilities. Play is foundational to a child-centered approach to learning.

### **Curriculum- or Child-Centered Approach to Learning**

A curriculum-centered approach takes a narrow band of input into learning. This approach tries to “fit children to a set curriculum,” rather than “fitting the curriculum” to children’s needs. Unfortunately, when schooling is centered on the curriculum and not on the child, it does not fit the exact place a child is building his or her knowledge and understanding.

In play, the child is learning at exactly his or her point of *understanding*. A problem presented by a teacher may not be where the child is, but a problem presented in play is only a problem if the child sees it as so. Play is that perfect fit for the child and his or her understanding.

Social play is a natural scaffold for children to decenter and to make friends. It is the natural tool for cognitive dissonance where one child has a different point of view than another child, leading the children to reconsider what they know and understand, often leading them to deeper understanding.

Play, as Selma Wasserman (1992) suggests, “allows children to make discoveries that go far beyond the realm of what we adults think is important to know” (p. 202). Do we choose a narrow curriculum-centered or a broad child-centered approach to education that allows children to make discoveries that are important and personally relevant to them?

Not providing play opportunities for children in the school context, runs the risk of creating “dot-to-dot” children—children, who master paint-by-number skills, instead of painting a masterpiece of their own imagination and creation.

Brain research suggests that play supports an active brain, and an active brain “makes permanent neurological connections critical to learning; inactive brains do not make the necessary permanent neurological connections” (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p. 33). Play increases neural structures and scaffolds development. The parts of the brain that children use when playing are integrated mainly in the connections between the amygdala (predominantly emotional center) and neocortex (predominantly thinking center) according to Fromberg (2002). She notes that

the same parts of the brain also affect attention, potential attitudes toward learning, creative thinking, problem solving, and the arts. Strengthening the amygdala strengthens these interrelated capacities . . . When children perceive that events are personally relevant to them, their neural connections proliferate and situations and ideas become part of their long-term memory. Meaningless things . . . will not typically become part of long-term memory. (pp. 29–31)

Stone (1992) found that when children “played” with Greek letters within a story context, the letters became part of their long-term memory. However, when a traditional approach of learning letters was used (chanting, repeatedly writing letters, skill and drill), children did not retain the letters in long-term memory. Play within a story provided a meaningful context for the children.

Play is the optimal context for meaning to develop. Meaning is when one understands something; it makes sense. Children make sense of their world through play. Meaning includes concepts, ideas, emotions, and motives—the whole of life. Children’s affect—how they feel—is also important to their learning because when children are busy worrying about their competence or coping with a sense of inadequacy, they find it difficult to focus on new meanings (Fromberg, 2002; Bruner, 1983). When a curriculum-centered approach is out of sync with a child’s understanding, it dangerously risks the child’s ability to learn, creating stress for the child, rather than well-being (Elkind, 1982).

A curriculum-centered approach to learning is often called a *linear curriculum* (Fromberg, 2002). However, children learn in nonlinear ways. Every child is unique in how he or she learns and how long it takes to build individual understanding. A linear curriculum is also more likely to initiate a sense of inadequacy or failure, whereas there is no failure in play. Play is nonlinear and in the control of the child. With school failure, children are at high risk of retention, a side effect of a curriculum-centered school model. Research demonstrates that retention is anti-well-being. Children who do not fit the rigid benchmarks of grade-level standards and are subsequently retained, equate retention with the stress of a death in the family (Shepard & Smith, 1986). A linear curriculum encourages a one-size-fits-all approach to learning. Whereas, a child-centered approach, incorporating play, supports the affective side of

learning. “Positive emotions such as curiosity, generally improve motivation and facilitate learning. . . ; negative emotions, such as anxiety, panic, threats, and stress, generally detract from motivation (Isenberg & Quisenberry, 2002, p. 36). For example, a fourth-grade teacher noted how one of her students came to her in tears because he felt threatened by the high-stakes test, which would occur the next day. She tried her best to console the child, but could not relieve the child of his anxiety and stress over the fear of failure and ultimate retention. The impact of stressful, high-stakes tests in a curriculum-centered approach encroaches on child abuse in the arena of caring for the well-being of children. Should schooling be about threatening children for the sake of a test score?

In a linear environment, curriculum-centered approach, one will also find children who are passive, submissive, “afraid to take risks or rise to the challenge, who shy away from new problems, content that once the answer has been found, there’s no need to learn any further” (Wasserman, 1992, p. 122). A linear environment usually is a classroom, which is task oriented, where the learning is directed by the teacher so children are not “off task.” In a nonlinear environment, children have the freedom to play with ideas, socialize with others, and become autonomous learners. Children also enjoy the freedom of time to build their own understandings. Play contributes to a “child’s sense of success, power, and self-esteem” (Fromberg, 2002).

### **The Importance of Play and Imagination**

Some types of schooling value rational, linear processes more than imaginative, nonlinear processes. Following the dotted line of the curriculum becomes more important than creating a brushstroke of color, original design, and personal flair. Vygotsky (1976) suggests that play leads development, and imagination is a future-oriented phenomenon. Imagination lets us invent things that are not yet reality. Theorists (Fein, 1987; Singer & Singer, 1990) also consider imaginative play as crucial to children’s mental health and social adjustment.

In Selma Wasserman’s article (1992), *Serious Play in the Classroom*, she notes how many eminent adults departed from normal schooling in order to “play around.” For example, the Wright brothers asked their mother if they could stay home from school so they could “tinker around in the backyard.” Their mother said, “yes,” and they invented the airplane. Frank Lloyd Wright, the famed, innovative architect, was encouraged by his mother to play with “colored papers and cubes of wood” (p. 203). She believed this type of play would enhance his intellectual development. In play, children are not locked into conforming to a set of standards of what is right or wrong. As Wasserman notes, “The creation of new ideas does not come from minds trained to follow doggedly what is already known. Creation comes from tinkering and playing around, from which new forms emerge” (p. 203). Shakespeare surely would not have pleased his teacher because he played with language and invented the words like *majestic*, *hurry*, *lonely*, and *radiance* instead of using traditional, established words.

Richard Feynman, Nobel Prize winner in Physics, relates in his book, *Surely You’re Joking Mr. Feynman* (1985), how play contributed to his love of physics and his winning of the Nobel Prize. He worked out an equation for wobbles by simply playing. The Wright brothers, Frank Lloyd Wright, Shakespeare, and

Feynman are just a few examples of the relationship of play to creative adulthood. Wasserman (1992) notes, “The freedom to create and invent appears to be closely connected with the development of creative, inventive, innovative adults” (p. 203).

### **Advocating for a Place in School**

Powerful learning emerges from play and surely should not be separated from play (Frost, Wortham, & Reifel, 2008). Pressure to learn skills outside of the play context can be stressful for children, which does not support their well-being; it is “mis-educating” children (Elkind, 1987, 1990; Little & Cohen-Vogel, 2016). The best schools are places that support “warm human relationships, imaginative play, and playful learning and children participate in choosing their activities . . . not following rigid curricula designed to increase test scores” (Miller & Almon, 2011, p. 17).

However, the current, dominant view of education is not focused on the well-being of children. A standards-driven education with a highly prescriptive curricula and high-stakes tests deprives children of the “pleasure and personal value of learning, discover, and coming to be” (Thomas, 2010, p. 33). As Miller and Almon (2011) note, “The desire for a fast track to success, coupled with the push for tough standards and test-based accountability, has built a new superhighway without speed limits or guardrails—a dangerous place for children” (pp. 2–3). As a parent, Tama Koss Caldarone (2016) describes how her young daughter loves to create and play, but at school, she is “herded like cattle, not treated like a child. She is forced to sit in a chair most of her day watching a screen” which her teacher uses to teach “through a computer projected onto a wall (p. 1).” She believes our children deserve better.

We must not deny our children the essentials for a healthy life. We must contribute to their well-being!

Nancy Carlsson-Paige (2013) in her TedTalk, “When Education Goes Wrong: Taking the Creativity and Play out of Learning,” passionately states:

When we watch children play, we understand how central play is to healthy development – to children’s emotional, social, and cognitive health and learning. Through play . . . children build ideas and relationships that become the foundation for success . . . Today’s overemphasis in schools . . . on standards and testing is . . . resulting in more and more direct instruction at the expense of play . . . When we drill and grill children, we cut out the powerful natural capacities they bring to the learning experience – their creativity, original thinking, capacity to problem solve and invent new ideas, their natural ability to cooperate, initiate, and persevere. When we take these amazing capabilities children have out of the education experience, we take out the love of learning. What we have to do is figure out: How do we create an educational system. . . that nurtures and develops and builds onto the magnificent capacities children bring with them when they come to school?

Do we want to produce dot-to-dot children who fill in the blanks, or do we want our children to think for themselves, to create and invent, and to love learning? Engel (2015) asks us to consider that, “if we want to create happy children who love learning, forcing them to sit at desks or tables through early childhood is not going to do it. They need to play . . .” (p. 324).

If play is absent from schooling or minimized because of perceived “more important” learning, we significantly decrease the possibilities for children to build meaning and understanding, imagine, and create. We crowd out important types of learning with an increasing focus on academics and an absence of play (Bassok, Latham, & Rorem, 2016; Levin, 2016; Strauss, 2016).

Carlsson-Paige adds:

There are also impressive numbers of young children who do manage to adapt to overly academic programs. But even for them, it comes at a cost. They lose out on all the benefits of play-based learning. Instead they learn facts and skills by rote practice; they learn that there are right and wrong answers, that the teacher defines what is learned. They learn compliance. They don't get to discover that they can invent new ideas. They don't get to feel the sense of empowerment found in playful learning (Strauss, 2016).

Haji and Cuypers (2011) invite us to consider that the aim of education should include the “intrinsic value of personal well-being” where each child's life is personally good as well as good for others. In addition, Elkind (1989) sees the aim of education as facilitating development, creative activity, and the personal construction of knowledge which is accommodated in practices that are appropriate for children, including play, rather than producing children who score high on tests of achievement through the use of inappropriate practices. Elkind advocates replacing psychometric educational psychology, which sees the learner's abilities only measured by tests, with a developmentally appropriate approach that sees the learner as *developing* abilities through personal construction. The two philosophies are in total opposition according to Elkind. Which one do we choose? Which one provides a learning environment, including play, where children can thrive and flourish? Brighthouse (2006) believes the aim of education is to “promote human flourishing” and the “school should see itself as having an obligation to facilitate the long-term flourishing of the children” (p. 42).

Without play, what a colorless place the world will be for our children! More importantly, we cannot sacrifice the well-being of children on the altar of a curriculum-centered, standards-based approach, and accompanying high-stakes tests. We cannot trade the freedom and power of play for the pressure of rigid schooling and testing. We cannot abandon our children's well-being, quality of life, now nor in the future. We must find a way to invent and support a schooling system which is nonlinear, child-centered, and incorporates play as a process to learning. We must invent a schooling system that supports and nurtures the well-being of every child.

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# Connecting Storytelling and Social Wellness: A Case for Holistic Storytelling in the Elementary Classroom

Rachel Tinckler

## Abstract

Storytelling has a fundamental place in teaching practice, most noticeably in the sharing and developing of curricular content. But teachers share more than academic content with children. A critical prerequisite for meaningful, engaged learning is a strong sense of community and social wellness in the classroom. Based on an inquiry into literature and reflection on personal practice, this study asserts that the practice of storytelling fosters social wellness in the classroom and supports the healthy development of each child as a whole human being within and as part of that community. Connecting storytelling and social wellness, this inquiry offers a unique definition of “holistic storytelling.”

## Storytelling and Social Wellness

I have always been mesmerized by story. A few precious dusty, worn volumes of tales from my childhood still claim their rightful space on the bookshelves of my adulthood. Occasionally when I turn through their pages, decades melt and the inner feelings of childhood bubble forth from some fountain of memory inside me. What is most magical though is that it is not the text that I read and remember, but rather the sound of my mother’s voice I hear. In fact, the books are just the artefacts of my lived experience with storytelling. Just as important as the content of the story was the cadence and tone of the voice that told the story, and my connection to those lived moments were deep and sincere.

To this day, storytelling still has the power to captivate me. While I have a love too for written text, it is the pairing of story and voice that still charms and enthralls me. Perhaps this is why now, in my professional life as an elementary school teacher, I hold storytelling as a fundamental and revered tenet of my pedagogical work with children. Storytelling has tremendous power to form, strengthen, and maintain our sense of self, our perception of others, and our sense of community.

In fact, storytelling has its roots in the very foundations of our humanity and human beings have told stories as long as we have had voice. Sherman (2008) suggests that storytelling is one of the oldest human activities, possibly as old as language itself (p. xvii). Storytelling is a fundamental sharing of the human experience, and each of us shares a multitude of stories every day. The oral tradition of storytelling in particular weaves across all cultures and civilizations and throughout our human history. Sherman further asserts that the pull of story is universal. There is no known culture, Sherman suggests, without some form of storytelling, and the craving to know what comes next is felt by every human being (p. xvii).

Similarly, Leeming and Sader (1997) state that storytelling is a defining characteristic of human beings where we are united in a universal attempt to understand ourselves (p. 3).

Storytelling is ubiquitous in our educational experiences as well, with teachers drawing on a wide variety of storytelling in support of creating learning experiences with children. For example, storytelling can be used in the classroom to support all aspects of literacy learning (Agosto, 2013; Davies, 2007). However, the power of story extends well beyond its use as a curricular vessel or literacy strategy. Story is infused in the very essence of curriculum and can serve as a means of leading children into curricular topics, and each unit of study can be approached as a story to be told (Egan, 1986).

A somewhat lesser explored use of storytelling is that of therapeutic or healing storytelling, in which story is used with a specific intention of providing some form of healing or health giving. This kind of storytelling is more often seen in the field of therapy and counselling (Carlson & Arthur, 1999; Land, 2007; Parker & Wampler, 2006). In addition, this same manner of storytelling is prominent in the realm of Waldorf education, where it is also referred to as “pedagogical storytelling” (Burrows, 2013; Perrow, 2008; Schwartz, 1997, 1999).

While these examples above highlight how storytelling is successfully used in a wide variety of pedagogical and therapeutic practices, my own inquiry lies in the exploration of storytelling as a rich, human experience and the ways in which that richness of story and connection to human experience can bring support to both individual children and the community as a whole. My inquiry draws from all aspects of storytelling with the fundamental perspective that teachers share far more than academic, curricular content with children each day. Critical for meaningful engagement in learning is a strong sense of social wellness among children and with their teacher. This study asserts that the practice of storytelling fosters social wellness and cohesion in the classroom community and supports the healthy development of each child as a whole human being within that community.

For the purposes of this research, *storytelling* is defined as the practice of sharing a story aloud to a live audience of listeners without the aid or intermediary of a book. It is a direct communication and shared, lived experience between teller and listener. This research assumes the position of teller is the teacher in an elementary classroom, so that she is the one to tell stories with intention to support the wellness of child and community alike. Critical to this study is the perception of each child in the classroom as a whole human being. Therefore, the term *child* (or *children*) is used to represent a holistic view of the child, as opposed to *student*, which speaks more specifically to a child in his or her learning capacities. Specifically, a holistic child perspective sees the whole child, her connection to the natural world, and the spirituality of each child (Hanckel & Segal, 2016). Finally, the term *social wellness*, while taken up in more detail later in the discussion, refers to a person’s positive sense of self and well-being as well as positive interactions and reciprocity with others in a healthy community.

To explore the connection between storytelling and social wellness in the elementary classroom, in this

article I first look at a definition of social wellness and its place in a classroom of children. I then consider the positive impact storytelling has on the individual child within the classroom. Next, I turn to the impact storytelling has on the classroom community as a whole. Following, I present a definition of holistic storytelling grounded in the connection between storytelling and social wellness. Finally, I share a perspective on my own personal experience with storytelling in the elementary classroom.

## A Praxis Inquiry

I conducted this inquiry as a practicing teacher hoping to investigate the place of storytelling in supporting children's well-being that could be used by teachers in elementary classrooms. The primary motivation for my research comes from a deep belief that I, as an elementary school teacher, bring more than intellectual, academic learning to my work with children each day. In fact, children need to feel a sense of wellness in their selves and in their community before they can truly open themselves to meaningful learning. Therefore, I continually strive in my teaching practice to support children not just in their learning, but also more holistically as developing young persons, helping to provide them with skills and perspectives that support their overall wellness. In addition, I do not view a class of students as just an amalgamation of individuals. A class is rather a community and the health of that community has a direct impact on each of its members.

One of my own repeating pedagogical themes continues to be storytelling. In my life as a teacher, I have been strongly attracted to the power of story, both in delivering and supporting curricular content and, more broadly, as a means of exploring common experiences together. I have used story to inspire love of reading, introduce content and context, integrate curricular topics, support student writing, build empathy and resilience, and stimulate imagination. The use of story has been a foundation of my teaching philosophy in every teaching position I have held and has been a constant source of teaching inspiration for me throughout my years as a teacher. Recently, I have come to develop and explore the place and importance of storytelling in fostering children's sense of wellness in the classroom, and this wondering became the centre of my inquiry research.

## Conceptual Framework

Personally, I am an anthropologist at heart: I am innately drawn to observe human experiences and behaviours, exploring both the differences and shared conditions of being human. This is true in my teaching life as well, where I have a deep interest in children as young human beings, and understanding each child's unique complexities helps me honour each one more fully.

The conceptual framework for this study is grounded in a constructivist-pragmatic worldview (Creswell, 2014). This research is constructivist in that it was formed in the assumption that human beings construct their own meaning as they engage in and make sense of the world around them, particularly through social interactions (Creswell, 2014). A strong motivation in this research is about seeking understanding.

In addition, a pragmatic lens has been used in this research in that the research is occurring in context, and the truth is what works at a given time, thus creating a real-world practice-oriented approach (Creswell, 2014).

The concept of *holism* is also a fundamental, underlying assumption in this research. Holism holds the perspective of looking at an object as a whole, rather than its fragmented parts (Verschuren, 2001). Verschuren further offers than the concept of holism “is important for understanding and maintaining the steady state or equilibrium of a system. In general not the sum of the individual parts of a system makes up an equilibrium, but the integrated whole of these parts” (p. 400). Similarly, Ratner (2008) describes holism as a theory that regards “individuals or elements as reciprocally influencing each other” (p. 513). Therefore, the concept of holism is a very appropriate lens for this study as it supports my two-fold conviction of the child as a whole and the classroom community as an integrated whole. In this article, I assert that such holistic perspectives provide wisdom and insight that can be meaningfully extended and easily taken up in the field of education.

### **Thematic Review: A Reflection on an Evolving Process**

The questions that arose out of my praxis inquiry motivated me to move beyond my classroom experience with children and into themes of storytelling and wellness in the educational literature. Specifically, the data for this research was collected in a thematic review of the literature, including scholarly journal articles, websites, and publications, related to ideas of storytelling and primarily in the field of education, and elementary education in particular. In addition, given the connection I set out to explore between storytelling and wellness, my thematic review drew also from interdisciplinary fields, including health care, counselling, business, and postsecondary education.

To further frame my research, I draw also from the use of social wellness in postsecondary environments (University of Calgary, n.d.; University of New Hampshire, n.d.; University of California at Riverside, n.d.; University of California at Davis, n.d.), and build my own connections between the concepts of storytelling and social wellness. In connecting these two concepts, I identify the positive influence storytelling has on both individual children and the community of children as a whole. Finally, I offer a definition of holistic storytelling and suggest how this type of storytelling can find its way into every teacher’s practice.

## **Social Wellness in the Classroom**

Social wellness is a concept that is growing in use and attention. At present, the promotion of social wellness is most evident on the campuses of colleges and universities across North America, as well as in the realm of life coaching services, where it is intended to promote wellness for its students. Most broadly, the term wellness encapsulates general good health and a sense of well-being in one's life (Schwartz, 2013). Thus, social wellness begins with this basic premise of wellness and expands into a

two-fold definition to encompass both self and others (University of Calgary, n.d.; University of New Hampshire, n.d.; University of California at Riverside, n.d.; University of California at Davis, n.d.). Social wellness arises from the idea that well-being in one's life comes from both a positive sense of self and positive sense of belonging. Expressed another way, I offer that social wellness is experienced when the *I* is healthy and well, and the *I* is healthy and well in its interactions with others.

Using information from a variety of postsecondary institutions (University of Calgary, n.d.; University of New Hampshire, n.d.; University of California at Riverside, n.d.; University of California at Davis, n.d.) and my own synthesizing, some essential components are outlined below to provide a working definition of social wellness. Social wellness is present when an individual is able to:

- Display respect for self and others, including an appreciation for diversity;
- Exhibit self-confidence;
- Process emotional experiences in healthy ways;
- Display resilience;
- Demonstrate self-advocacy skills;
- Cultivate and maintain a positive sense of personal identity;
- Build, choose, and maintain positive, healthy relationships;
- Effectively communicate with others;
- Offer and receive friendship;
- Manage conflict in positive, healthy ways;
- Create and maintain positive, healthy boundaries with others.

While notions of social wellness are being taken up predominantly with adult audiences at present, the components that make up good social wellness are the very things that we as teachers address every day in the classroom. With adults, aspects of social wellness can be explicitly named and worked with metacognitively. That is, we adults can often very easily think about our thinking and make intentional changes. This language and the process of such self-actualizing is a bit beyond the self-reflective capacities of children, but that is not to say that children do not understand the ideas behind the language. They do very deeply. In fact, the notions of social wellness are fundamentally what we teach and work to instill in children every day: having a positive sense of self, interacting positively with others, and seeing oneself as a positive, contributing member of a community. Children may not have the language that I use here, but fundamentally children know when they feel right in themselves and know when they feel connected to those around them. Children have an innate drive to seek and maintain social wellness.

Fundamentally, social wellness has two essential aspects: wellness in regard to self and wellness in regard to community. For a child to experience a sense of social wellness, both criteria need to be met. In this inquiry, I proffer that storytelling in the classroom supports the positive development of social wellness in both of these aspects: it supports a child's sense of self as well as a sense of community for the whole. I present evidence for both of these claims in the following two sections.

## Storytelling and the Child

As Carlson and Arthur (1999) assert, every child is continually striving to become a well-adjusted human being. If we hold this perspective in teaching, this reminds us to see the whole child and not just a few selected aspects such as a behaviour or difficulty. Our work with every child can be in support of this striving, especially with the use of storytelling in the classroom. In conducting my thematic review, I developed the conviction that storytelling supports the wellness of each child in three specific ways, including: promoting her capacity for emotional processing and resilience, making personal meaning, and cultivating personal connections. Each of these aspects supports a sense of wellness within oneself, thereby supporting the first component of social wellness.

### Supporting Emotional Processing and Resilience

Storytelling supports a child's emotional processing by providing an alternative experience where she can see her own situation lived in the experience of another. In this way, the experience is removed, or disconnected from the child, and it allows her to more fully work through the processing of her own challenge with a sense of objectivity and without personal judgment (Burrows, 2013; Nguyen, Stanley, Stanley, & Wang, 2015; Schwartz 1997, 1999). This process of detaching from an experience and seeing it objectively allows for the untangling of the emotional response to the experience (Burrows, 2013). This is the process of positive emotional processing and developing resilience, both of which are healthy aspects of social wellness.

When a child hears tales of challenge, courage, and resolution, she feels hope within herself that she can also conquer challenges, face fears, and be courageous. More importantly, she is able to experience this sense of hope and confidence in moving forward without having to examine the challenges directly in their own situation, and the story presents a safe and indirect way to garner resilience (Perrow, 2008; Nguyen et al., 2015).

Along with the ideas of emotional processing and resilience, storytelling can support a child's healthy development of self-esteem and personal identity. McCaleb (2003) cites the use of story as medicine that provides "images of wholeness that can awaken and lead a person toward self affirmation of what is uniquely good and beautiful about his or herself" (p. 71). Nguyen and colleagues (2015) propose that "[s]torytelling can help people form new identities in times of conflict, recall old wisdom and transform endings to challenges in life" (p. 3), and the lessons learned through storytelling can "serve as a protective balm against the painful storms of life" (p. 3).

### Supporting Personal Meaning-Making

Personal meaning making in large part is about how we learn what is appropriate and what our social, ethical, and moral values are. One of the subtle powers of storytelling is that it allows a child to make her own meaning of a situation and reach her own conclusions. That is, storytelling is an indirect, yet

potent means of reaching a child in ways that are palatable and developmentally appropriate. Our very human experience is based on story and using the medium of storytelling allows for experiences to be shared and understood in ways that are non-threatening and removed from personal experience (Eder, 2010; Parker & Wampler, 2006; Schwartz, 1997).

Davies (2007) suggests that storytelling aids in the development of a child's ability to interpret and understand events beyond her immediate experience, and these stories provide a positive and safe environment where she can learn lessons and discover truths in her own way (p. 5). In addition, Schwartz (1997) offers that in the school years, children's sense of self and personal responsibility is still dreamy and diffuse, as much "outside" themselves as "inside." Hearing themselves described in a purely imaginative and objective way helps children more than words that are directly spoken to them (p. 17). Sherman (2008) shares that, "wrapped in the sweet pill of an entertaining story, a moral goes down more easily" and allows for a message to be developed by "saying without saying" (p. xviii). A child, therefore, can best come to her own moral conclusions when ideas of morals and ethics are brought to her in an indirect manner, thereby allowing her to see the situation outside herself.

### **Cultivating a Personal Connection**

It is not that a child cannot glean a similar experience from reading a story or having a story read aloud. In fact, the power of the written word is mighty. But storytelling, especially as I have described it here, offers an advantage over printed text because it is highly adaptable to any given situation. More importantly, I, as the class teacher, can have a strong sense of what the child is experiencing and what type of story will help bring an image or journey that will support that child's emotional processing.

Another benefit of sharing through storytelling, as opposed to text, is what Burrows (2013) describes in her research as an "atmosphere of understanding and empathy" created between teller and listener (p. 180). Through storytelling, it appears to the child that the story originates in the teller. Therefore, the child can experience a strong and live connection with the teller and feel that the teller truly understands what the child is experiencing. Storytelling creates a direct and personal experience between the teller (teacher) and listener (child) through which a strong sense of personal connection and understanding is subtly, yet meaningfully, established.

## **Storytelling and the Community**

I am fortunate enough to teach in a learning environment where I get to engage in storytelling with children almost every day, and I was eager to explore through this research what implication storytelling has on the community as a whole. Through my inquiry, I found that the practice of storytelling supports social wellness in the classroom community as a whole in three ways: first, it creates a shared, communal experience; second, it creates a relational experience; and third, it allows for a tailored, personalized experience.

## A Communal Experience

Storytelling draws children together into one shared, common experience. It offers an opportunity to experience and express feelings essentially in unison. Such communal, shared experiences are the heart of relationships (Davies, 2007). The importance of this point should not be overlooked. Storytelling creates an experience in which the class essentially lives and breathes, for at least a short period of time, as a single organic entity. Sherman (2008) proffers that

the most wonderful gift of storytelling is the bonding of a group. Held close under the spell of the story, the group breathes as one, and the shared experience softens the edges between individuals and brings everyone closer in the warmth of the moment. (p. xviii)

It is not often that this gets created in the classroom, and it is the power of storytelling that allows a group unity to emerge. Now extend that shared space that is created through storytelling to something more than curricular content. Imagine it as a place to work both pedagogically and holistically to build community and foster social wellness.

## A Relational Experience

Storytelling is also *relational*. It promotes the building of relationship and is an intimate, yet impermanent experience between teller and listener. It is an experience that is both personal and temporary, with the promise to be re-created, but never in the exact same way. In this way, both teller and listener are co-creators in a unique experience of mutual creation (Abatan, 2011). Storytelling is both a shared and temporal occurrence in that it is brought for the class at a particular time and in a particular way, like a gift shared between teller and listener. Moreover, storytelling is not a lone experience as it must have both teller and listeners (Phillips, 2013); it is always a shared experience and the sharing of that experience builds relationship between teller and listener as well as among listeners, and in educational environments, that experience fosters relationship and community, a cornerstone of social wellness.

I reiterate the point that when a teacher engages in storytelling, it appears to the children that the teacher is not only living the story with them, but also embodies the knowledge, wisdom, and understanding shared through that story. Children feel they are being offered something directly from the teacher, not from an unknown author relayed by the teacher. It appears that the teacher is giving something of and out of herself, and indeed she is. The benefits of this relational experience are manifold, but two aspects in particular are of notable importance. First, children perceive the teacher as an authority who possesses wisdom and understanding, and this perception fosters trust and respect. Second, storytelling is direct communication where both teller and listeners are united in an experience in the true language of relationship (McCaleb, 2003). Storytelling, for both teller and listener, draws subtly, yet fundamentally, on the essence of our communication as human beings, including what it means to listen and what it means to speak. Storytelling creates a full experience in human communication, with nothing to interrupt the connection between teller and listener. Such personal and experiential opportunities create a level of intimacy, empathy, and unity that reinforce positive relationship (Berkowitz, 2011).

## A Tailored Experience

One of the great advantages of storytelling over sharing textual material is that storytelling allows for the teacher to tailor and personalize the story to meet the perceived needs or mood of any situation in the classroom. Davies (2007) speaks to the power of oral narrative as a tool entirely at the hands of the teacher: “I am the captain, and the ship is my story. I am taking the audience on a journey. I moved to the story, changing pace in style. In essence I’m free to do what I want, when I want” (p. 5). The flexibility and adaptability of storytelling allows a teacher to respond to nearly any situation in the classroom subtly, indirectly and imaginatively (Mellon, 1992).

In storytelling, a teacher must rely on careful, intuitive listening to read the needs of a given situation and then intentionally choose and tailor a story to match those circumstances. As a teacher considers a story to share with the class, it is important to keep in mind that it is not just the content of the story that matters, but just as essential is both the context and manner in which the story is shared (Eder, 2010).

## Toward a Practice of Holistic Storytelling

Much is written in current educational literature about the place of storytelling in taking up curriculum (Davies, 2007; Egan, 1986), but there is a significant gap in the literature about the notion of holistic storytelling. I offer the idea of holistic storytelling as beyond storytelling brought with the aim of conveying curricular content, literacy instruction, value education, and the like. It is storytelling that nurtures soul capacities, identity, belonging, and overall social wellness.

An approach to education connected to social wellness reminds us to see each child as a whole human being as opposed to collection of specific characteristics or behaviours. Such a holistic perspective can also allow a teacher to see the class as a whole, an entity unto itself, instead of a summation of individual pieces. From this holistic perspective, both child and class community benefit by being seen in their entirety.

Inspired by other researchers exploring holistic professional practices (Kubsch et al., 2007; McEvoy & Duffy, 2008), I offer the following definition in applying a holistic perspective to storytelling in the elementary classroom: *Holistic storytelling embraces the mind, body, and spirit of each child as well as the whole class community, and creates a classroom environment that nurtures social wellness. Holistic storytelling is both child-centered and community-focused in order to provide enhanced wellness for both the child and the class community, caring for both as a whole and unified entity.*

Holistic storytelling, therefore, is not one type of story or any set recipe. It is not simply the telling of a story to impart moral education or redirect behaviour, although those aspects can be included. Holistic storytelling is the practice of mindfully crafting and bringing stories to children with the intention to nurture a sense of social wellness within the community. By using storytelling in this way, I strive to

support both child and community in a way that promotes a true social wellness, where what is cultivated is healthy children in a healthy environment.

## Reflections From Classroom

In my own teaching practice, I find social wellness is fostered not just by the content of the story, but also by the very practice of regular storytelling. As I hope this article has illustrated, social wellness is a constellation of many aspects, and by practicing storytelling often these pieces are continually being tuned and refined. In reflecting on the ways in which I bring storytelling to children, I can point to two main impetuses: in the sharing of new learning content and for drawing attention to social issues. With the right story, both of these aspects are alive and active in one storytelling experience. Through the experience too, there is also the building of personal connection and an overall fostering of social wellness.

I have the privilege of teaching in a school where storytelling has a central place in our learning experiences. Most often storytelling is used to introduce new content, including presenting context and visual imagery to accompany that content. The story can be narrative or descriptive in nature, depending on the content. Fundamentally though, the storytelling experience plants the seeds for what will hopefully start to germinate in children in the following days in their learning. This allows curricular learning to be introduced and developed with children in ways that continue to pique their interest and build meaningful connections with the topic of study. Truly I feel it is through storytelling that I open the door for children to have a personal and soulful relationship with their learning, not just an intellectual experience.

When children are steeped in storytelling, they engage in it fully and effortlessly. It is therefore a seamless step to bring a story to children that is not about new content, but instead more focused on tuning an aspect of social wellness. Any teacher teaching any age of children can work with this idea by asking, *what content can I bring to children that meets the development of their sense of self, including self-esteem and self-confidence, as well as how to understand their classmates better?* For example, I used storytelling to present examples of a character (child, animal, or even otherwise, depending on the age) who faces a challenge or quest, which is indirectly a struggle with some sense of self or connection with others, and how that individual, and sometimes together with a group, find resolution. Stories of this nature reach the children in ways direct words could not, allowing them to see the situation outside themselves without any sense of shame or guilt. What I appreciate most about the use of storytelling in this way is that it allows me to personalize the story to what is happening in our community, bringing it in the most meaningful, yet subtle and indirect way.

One of the joys of working with storytelling is that I often cannot predict where the right story will emerge, and I offer an example to illustrate how I recently used storytelling for both presenting new content and supporting social dynamics. Earlier this year in our study of botany, I was sharing a story with the class

that described the symbiotic relationship between conifer trees and mosses. This story was descriptive in nature, in that it was factually accurate from a scientific perspective, but also went beyond the factual content to present visual imagery and personal connection to enliven the content. It was a story that allowed the children to *feel* this symbiotic relationship, rather than me simply telling them about it or reading it in a text. Serendipitously, this learning came right at a time when I was looking for a way to support my class in being positive role models as older buddies to a group of younger children in the school. I revisited our story from botany about the conifers and the mosses, and this time I extended it allegorically, creating a story that painted my class as the protective guardian conifers and the younger child as the gentle mosses. Through this storytelling and the implied metaphor, I could actually see the children hold themselves a little more upright and embody that nurturing, protective force. This imagery brought to the children a vision of themselves to aspire to far more authentically than if I had just told them how and why to be positive older buddies.

The experience of storytelling goes well beyond its content, be it curricular or social in nature. Content becomes the *medium* for the experience that we share together. When children and I share a storytelling experience each day, there are several minutes of intense focus and careful listening that comes not from me directing it, but rather from shared expectation and unified experience. When we form this way together, without explicit instruction, but through mutual, respectful habit and anticipation, I can see reflected the healthy social cohesion of our community. It also reminds me that I need to bring them something worthy of this careful, collective listening.

The capacity for personal connection between teacher and child also goes beyond what I shared above. When I speak a story to children, they hear it as a lived, authentic experience, and once this becomes part of an established learning rhythm, it is hard to engage otherwise. I will confess that I did not fully appreciate this until one day, feeling not very prepared to tell a story well, I tried to read to children instead. I managed to get two sentences read from the page when I had no choice but to stop. There was no journey here we were starting together, no shared experience. It felt to me flat and empty compared to our usual sharing. I could not look children in the eyes as I spoke to them. There were no natural pauses, no places for emphasis, intonation, or embellishment. I could not redirect or linger in part of the story based on their reactions. In fact, it was as though I had disconnected myself not only from the content, but also from children. Compared to what I was used to, this experience was vacant and hollow. It was in this moment that I truly realized the potency of storytelling and what it brought to my experiences with children each day. I turned over the sheet I was reading, stepped away from the stand that held the story, and let whatever knowledge I had of the story originate from me, not the page. In doing so, I reestablished my connection not just with the content, but also, and more importantly, with the children. What I brought to them, and what they gave back to me, even in what I felt was a weak story, was stronger than anything I could have read off the page.

While I still feel like a novice storyteller, I now cannot imagine teaching children without the use of storytelling. I have told enough stories to children to know that no explanation is needed around the

stories and the ideas implicit instead need to settle within them, allowing each child to let the experience live within them. And then, when I hear children getting ready for recess, sharing images and ideas from the story and taking them into their play, I know the power of the story is working within them.

## Conclusion

Storytelling is an integral part of the human experience. While storytelling has a multitude of uses in pedagogical practices, my inquiry offers a unique perspective on storytelling as a means of supporting social wellness in an elementary classroom. Social wellness has the two fundamental components of being healthy in oneself and healthy in interactions with others. Therefore, in connecting social wellness and storytelling, I have examined the ways in which storytelling supports both the individual child and the class community as a whole, thereby exploring both aspects of social wellness.

A unique contribution of this research is the creation of the definition of holistic storytelling, which is storytelling used by the teacher in the classroom in a way that seeks to unify mind, body, and spirit of each child and thereby enhance social wellness for individuals and community alike. This type of storytelling seeks to reconnect with the original and fundamental essence of storytelling as a unifying, meaning-making experience in which we hope to understand ourselves and our relationships with each other.

My own inquiry feels as though it has just been a peek at the possibilities held within holistic storytelling. I have brought the perspective of such storytelling as originating with the teacher in an elementary classroom, but the potential reaches far outside this specific situation. How could such ideas be brought to children in early childhood education? Or in pedagogical work with adolescent and adult learners? Both Nguyen et al. (2015) and Horsely (2007) extend beyond learning environments and cite the place of storytelling as a positive support for language learners and immigrant communities. The possibilities for holistic storytelling extend well beyond the elementary classroom. Another potential consideration for future research is placing storytelling in the hands of children. In what different ways would this promote social wellness? What are the additional forms of media in which storytelling can be meaningfully shared?

Through the experience of storytelling we reconnect with our shared human experience. Through holistic storytelling, classrooms should become enhanced communities where children more consistently and more deeply feel a sense of social wellness. Moreover, it is not just within the classroom walls that children will feel open to and connected with each other. The sense of unity and commonality they gain from their enhanced sense of social wellness in the classroom, cultivated by storytelling, will hopefully follow them through their years of adolescence and adulthood. What started as a classroom community will continue and spread into new and larger communities, made up of individuals for whom community and others matter deeply.

My own experience with storytelling continues to be a journey. It started with great trepidation, and to be honest, not entirely of my own choosing. However, I am grateful that I was challenged in this way, and every time I tell a story I appreciate the potential and power that is created through storytelling. This shared, lived experience with my class connects us in a deep and meaningful way, not only while the story is told, but also after. When I finish a story with children, I never end with “the end,” because we have an unspoken recognition that it is not a truth. Rather, the magic of storytelling is that it creates a beginning. I hope my research has presented the possibility of new beginnings for fellow teachers in the craft of storytelling.

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# Women Reflect on Being Well in Academia: Challenges and Supports

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## Abstract

A narrative approach was adopted to explore the experiences of 13 women who pursued academic careers. Analysis of the personal reflective narratives uncovered themes common to the participants, also the authors of this study, which focused on striving to have work-life balance, personal and professional costs associated with being unwell, and the impact of academic work on families. Findings highlighted suggestions for being well in academia such as choose to engage in work and leisure activities that are enjoyable and maintain relationships. Suggestions for universities included: provide clear promotion and tenure processes, examine workload expectations, promote wellness, and facilitate mentorship.

Kilborn (2016) describes wellness as a balance of the mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual dimensions of the self that require present awareness and mindfulness, connecting the whole self—body, mind, and spirit—to the collective well-being of society. It is this type of thinking—balance, interconnectedness, and wholeness—that grounds the concept of wellness and expands traditional understandings of health.

Examples of how wholeness, balance, and harmony are understood and practiced are prominent throughout wisdom traditions. For example, Hart (1999) explained the concept of wholeness through the medicine wheel (used by many Indigenous peoples such as Cree, Dakota, and Blackfoot), which is used to express relationships in sets of four, associated with the four cardinal directions: four aspects of humanness (emotional, physical, mental, spiritual); four cycles of life (birth/infancy, youth, adulthood, elder/death); four elements (fire, water, wind, earth); and four seasons (spring, summer, fall, winter).

Wholeness involves movement in/through all these aspects and is fundamental to the health of all living things. Of course, to move in this way we must recognize the need to balance our attention on the four aspects of these relationships, so one part is not emphasized to the detriment of the others. When one dimension is valued more, or when certain dimensions are not acknowledged at all, a state of “unwellness” often results.

Unfortunately, this is often the case in academic environments. Holistic understandings of how to be healthy and well do not fit with academia's dominant neoliberal discourse that reaffirms subject-object, process-product, and body-mind dichotomies (Kilborn, 2016), and does not consider the “embodied

persons' subjective experience in the world" (Rintala, 1991, p. 274). This disconnected culture is at odds with maintaining and promoting personal wellness.

In 2009, we, the authors, started a Writing Group in our faculty, meeting weekly to discuss our practices of teaching and researching in academia. We have conducted self-studies and arts-based representations to explore issues of common concern, such as our challenges in academia and the need for professional development (Badenhorst et al., 2016; McLeod et al., 2014; Young et al., 2017). This study focused on addressing the following questions in relation to well-being in academia: a) What are the tensions of personal wellness and academia? b) How do faculty members maintain health and well-being in academe? and c) What would a wellness-oriented academe look like and feel like?

## Faculty Wellness

Wellness is defined as a lifestyle centred on health, well-being, and balance among the spirit, body, and mind (Myers, Sweeney, & Witmer, 2000), and is critical for the scholarly work and research responsibilities of faculty members within academic institutions (Hubball & West, 2008). The strain that occurs for faculty members when wellness is not present has been linked to lower productivity, poor interactions with colleagues and students, and weak decision-making around departmental and university-wide issues (Klenke-Hamel & Mathieu, 1990).

Within higher education faculty, wellness has become an increasing concern as a result of research reports showing that faculty stress is on the rise (Catano et al., 2007; Miller, Buckholdt, & Shaw, 2008; Watts & Robertson, 2011). In comparison to the general population, academics experience higher levels of stress (Catano et al., 2007), and this stress has a substantial impact on the physical and psychological health of faculty members. In research among 1,470 academics from 56 Canadian universities, 13% of respondents recounted having "psychological strain," and 22% reported experiencing "physical health" symptoms, with many reporting the use of medication (Catano et al., 2007, p. 38). These findings point to a rise in faculty stress, which can potentially undermine personal and professional capabilities resulting in compromised productivity.

## Challenges Experienced by Academics

Historically, despite being low-paid as compared to industry professionals, academic jobs have been "envied for their tenure, light work, flexibility, perks such as overseas trips for study and or conference purposes, and the freedom to pursue their own research interests" (Gillespie, Walsh, Winefields, Dua, & Stough, 2001, p. 53). However, in previous decades, the nature and expectations of academic positions have changed considerably, as there has been a decrease in salaries, and an increase in workloads, pressure to attract external funding, and publish in academic journals (Gillespie et al. 2001).

## Workloads

Increases in faculty workload have been well reported in higher education research. Crespo and Bertrand (2013), in their study of workload at a large research-intensive Canadian university, determined the average weekly workload to be approximately 56.97 hours. Within these hours, the following were dedicated to each faculty function: 44.1% allocated to teaching, 35.2% to research, and 14.8% to service. The remaining time was spent on administrative tasks and communication.

The literature on faculty workload shows considerable variability in tasks performed, hours worked, and dedication to service, teaching, and research (Crespo & Bertrand, 2013). Research on faculty workload distinctions by gender, academic rank, discipline, and country are fairly limited (Crespo & Bertrand, 2013; Milem, Berger, & Dey, 2000).

Teaching, research, service, and administration functions, and the constant switching between them, often results in role ambiguity and significant stress levels (Bandura & Locke, 2003; Catano et al., 2007; Miller et al. 2008). The multifaceted professional life of academics reflects the complexity of their jobs, leading to stress that is multifold in nature. Researchers have tried to identify the sources of stress in academia. Gmelch, Wilke, and Lovrich (1986) identified common patterns for stress, noting three main sources: (i) self-expectations; (ii) excessive time constraints; and (iii) inadequate resources (p. 267). Likewise, Gillespie et al. (2001), in their review of the research conducted across the United Kingdom, United States, Australia, and New Zealand, found several key factors associated with faculty stress: (i) increased work load; (ii) time constraint; (iii) poor salary structure, (iv) fewer opportunities for promotion; (v) changing job roles; (vi) lack of recognition; and (vii) inadequate funding resources.

In addition to these stressors, more recent research identifies role ambiguity, student and technology-related issues, and family-work life balance as challenges (Antoniou, Polychroni, & Vlachakis, 2006; Bandura & Locke, 2003; Korotkov, 2008; Totten & Schuldt, 2009). Role ambiguity is reported as one of the highest sources of stress among academics. Lack of regular feedback received by academics is particularly problematic, as feedback is necessary to enable them to better understand their role(s) and evaluate their performance (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Lack of regular feedback provided to academics results in considerable uncertainty about their role, while positive feedback may serve as a reward leading to better performance, as well as lower levels of work-related stress. Furthermore, according to Antoniou and colleagues (2006), student interactions inside and outside the classroom, low-level engagement in classroom discussions, and problematic student attitudes, cause stress for faculty members.

Totten and Schuldt (2008, 2009) questioned the expectations for faculty in online teaching environments to be accessible 24/7 through the use of technology, and investigated the stress related to it. They found higher stress levels among faculty teaching online in comparison to face-to-face teaching.

## Tenure and Promotion Processes

Faculty face challenges that lead to stress as tenure and promotion processes are often vague regarding professional requirements and expectations. In order for a promotion in rank to occur, faculty must be aware of appointment, promotion, and tenure guidelines (Smith et al., 2016). Smith and colleagues (2016) determined in their research that the obscurity of these elements was an issue, and as such, they developed strategies to assist with clarity. These strategies included rubrics, checklists, and mentoring consultations, to name a few, to ensure the process was streamlined and transparent, and included a well-articulated plan for individual success. With regard to gender, research reveals that women appear to be more stressed about tenure and show greater concerns over expectations and criteria (Austin & Rice, 1998).

In terms of new academics, research has shown they find it significantly challenging to balance academic responsibilities and their home lives (LaRocco & Bruns, 2006; Rice, Sorcinelli, & Austin, 2000), whereas transitioning career academics have developed “a sense of self and pay attention to [their] priorities in life to achieve a personal and professional life balance” (Crane, O’Hern, & Lawler, 2009, p. 25). However, both sets of academics find social and professional support integral to their success in academia (Crane et al., 2009; Cruz & Sholder, 2013; LaRocco & Bruns, 2006).

## Women and Academia

Irrespective of geographic location, cultural context, or social location, women publish less and advance in academia more slowly than men (Thanacoody, Bartram, Barker, & Jacobs, 2006). In their self-study of 11 women’s experiences in balancing family and career, Penney et al. (2015) noted while they expected gender equity in an academic career, their perceptions were wrong; gender parity did not exist in academia.

Although female faculty represent roughly one third of all full-time university faculty in North America (CAUT, 2010; Galaz-Fontes et al., 2008; West & Curtis, 2006), they often hold lower ranks and fewer upper-level administrative positions; and in every aspect of academic career progression, they lag behind men (Krefting, 2003; Marschke, Laursen, Nielsen, & Rankin, 2007; Ornstein, Stewart, & Drakich, 2007; Perna, 2005).

Women in Canada are less likely than men to be hired into tenure-track positions despite receiving an increasing share of doctoral degrees (Drakich & Stewart, 2007). Research has identified the tenure process as privileging men and suggested academic institutional structures, policies, and practices disadvantage women (Fox, 2005; Leahey, 2006; Mason, Goulden, & Wolfinger, 2013; Perna, 2005; Valian, 2005; Williams, 2004). Women are more likely than men to be asked to demonstrate their competencies, and to work harder to prove themselves (Williams, 2004).

Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2006) suggest that even though women are increasingly earning the qualifications to enter academia, institutional barriers restrain women, particularly those with children

and family obligations. Also, gender-based demands and expectations associated with women's roles in families, inclusive of but not limited to pregnancy and child rearing, have been shown to constrain their ability to advance in the male model of academic success and meet requirements of tenure (Mason & Goulden, 2002). Generally, female faculty members publish less than their male equivalents, and this is particularly true for female faculty with children in Canada (Fox & Mohapatra, 2007; Leahey, Crockett, & Hunter, 2008; Padilla-Gonzalez, Metcalfe, Galaz-Fontes, Fisher, & Snee, 2011; Posen, Templer, Forward, Stokes, & Stephens, 2005).

It is widely accepted that low publication records reduce the likelihood of promotion and tenure and increase the likelihood of leaving academia (Acker & Armenti, 2004; Hirakata & Daniluk, 2009; Leahey et al., 2008; Penney et al., 2015; Pickett, 2017; Powell, 2013; van Anders, 2004). Furthermore, despite being equally committed to academic work and families, women report feeling guilty about dividing their time between these responsibilities, due to expectations surrounding their "second shift" of caregiving, household responsibilities, and the demands of holding an academic position (Evans, 2008; Penney et al., 2015; Pickett, 2017).

## Method

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is a collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places and involves social interaction with milieus. Simply put, narrative inquiry is stories lived and told (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 20). As inquirers, we engaged in telling, reliving, and retelling the stories of our experiences with respect to wellness in academia.

We were interested in understanding how women have been able to remain and thrive in academia. As members of a Faculty of Education writing group at Memorial University of Newfoundland, we collectively decided to employ writing as a lens of inquiry (Richardson & St. Pierre, 2008).

Personal narratives were used to understand the perceptions and experiences of 13 women (aged 31 to 60) who reflected on their individual journeys towards maintaining wellness in academia. We came from qualitative and quantitative research backgrounds and various fields of study, including Aboriginal education, adult education, art education, counselling psychology, Indigenous education, math education, music education, science education, second language education, social studies, special education, and wellness education. All but one of the writing group members had previous careers, having invested from two to 20 years as teachers (in varying disciplines), guidance counsellors, school psychologists, and clinical psychologists prior to transitioning into academia. At the time of writing, three of these women were on contract, five were tenure-track, and five were tenured.

## Data Collection Procedures

As suggested by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilbert (1998), we conceptualized our project as a "study that uses or analyzes narrative materials" (p. 2), and collected our data as "a story" in the form of personal

wellness narratives. The first two authors asked participants in this study to write personal narratives about how they live in an academic environment and strive to maintain or promote their own mental, physical, social, and spiritual well-being. These narratives focused on: the tensions of personal wellness and academia; how faculty members maintain their health and well-being in academe; and the characteristics of a wellness-oriented academe.

## **Data Analysis Procedures**

We employed the narrative method of thematic analysis, suggested by Riessman (1993), to address our research questions. To shed light on the emerging themes, members of the writing group were asked to share their narratives with others and to write down pertinent phrases that came to mind as the narratives were read aloud. The first author sorted the key phrases that arose from the narratives into separate thematic groups, which were presented to members of the writing group in order to further discuss how the key statements were categorized. She then reread each narrative in order to code by phrase and organize into identified themes, and then selected segments of text that were instrumental in highlighting participants' experiences surrounding wellness in academia. The selected excerpts were coded using the themes identified from the keywords when the narratives were read aloud. In reporting the results, we selected pseudonyms to represent our individual narratives.

## **Results**

Themes emerging from the analysis include our perceptions of the nature of wellness, the personal and professional cost of being unwell, and the impact of academic life on family. Suggestions for promoting individual wellness, as well as how academe can adapt to promote faculty wellness, are described.

### **The Nature of Wellness**

Our narratives described wellness in the academic context as being informed by a holistic perspective of wellness, and active and balanced engagement of personal, professional, and individual dimensions of the self. We felt wellness referred to a wholeness of experience, with Monica commenting, "Life can be lived fully and healthily if our mind, body, and spirit are intertwined with every experience. An absence or loss of any of these can easily create an imbalance." Other individuals related wellness to a well-balanced life. June felt, "Wellness means the balance of mind and body, work and life. Wellness means we have time to engage in recreational activities and are able to take care of our family members and property." We agreed wellness needed to be viewed from a holistic perspective, and discussed the need to consider an Indigenous worldview. Susan shared that, "The circle has four parts that represent the four aspects of being human: mind, body, heart, and spirit. When these four parts of my life are in a state of equilibrium, I have wellness in my life."

We also agreed wellness means having a balanced life, which is perceived as not working all the time. Robin described wellness as, "being physically well but also having a balanced life... being fit and healthy

but also having different interests and pursuits outside of work... [and] not having that burden, that weight of responsibility every moment of every day.”

### **Personal and Professional Cost of Being Unwell**

The personal and professional costs of being “unwell” were evidenced through the sharing of critical events of personal and family health crises, and the discussion of competitive environments which led to career and personal sacrifices and feelings of institutional oppression. We felt that a career in academia was at odds with maintaining wellness, with Abbey lamenting,

Unlike the service industry or some forms of medical professions, where you cannot serve tables or care for patients when you are at home during off hours, the flexibility of an academic profession impacted my ability to turn down my innate sense of guilt and desire to work.

Similarly, June stated, “I can only talk about the ideal situation, as I have not been successful in healthy living as an academic... PhD refers to ‘permanent health damage’.” In elaborating on the various forms of ill health she experienced while employed as an academic, June said, “I suffered severe pain and unknown skin irritations and allergy symptoms. The doctor said everything was caused by stress, but I was not convinced until much later.”

In the same vein, Roxanne noted, “In the past year I have been referred to three specialists – an allergist, ears nose and throat, and dermatologist.” She also noted the negative impact on her well-being: “Prior to moving into an academic environment I exercised just about daily. It would be rare that as a family we didn’t bike, walk, or swim regularly... I still have a membership to the gym, but I actually have not used it in over a year.” She felt, “I achieved tenure... at the expense of my own wellness and physical health. I packed on about 45 pounds of weight... I am now wondering if this job is worth this risk?”

Patricia’s comments epitomized the sentiments of the group: “Multitasking, over-loaded schedules, more-is-better mentality, productivity-at-any-cost perspectives... this leads to disconnectedness, distractedness, and escape from experience, which is a key source of increasing physical and mental illness in society.”

### **Impact of Academic Work on Families**

We felt an academic career affected our lives, as well as the lives of our family members. Kingston asked herself:

What are my children, now four and five, learning when I opt to stay home and work rather than go to their swimming lessons, and when there is tension in the air with my partner because “work-related” and academia-related anxiety has crept into our home?

Kingston continued to reflect on how an academic career affected her children:

What decisions are my children coming to about their own worthiness, and what am I saying to my partner and co-parent when I postpone our time together to send one last email, to take one more phone call from a student?

Abbey questioned how her actions influenced relationships: "In acquiring my life goals and pursuits, I sometimes wonder what I have lost along the way and how it has impacted my relationships." Kingston's comments encapsulated the sentiments and concerns surrounding maintaining wellness in academia: "Academia and wellness, in my experience, are inherently at odds. Wellness, scarcity and fear are incompatible. Academia cultivates scarcity and fear. There is never enough funding, enough time, enough resources."

## **Being Well in Academia**

Our narratives and discussions yielded many suggestions for being well in academia. Recommendations for faculty included: recognize that your work is important, engage in work and leisure activities you enjoy, maintain relationships, refrain from comparison, and take time to reflect and enjoy nature and wildlife. Recommendations for universities included: provide clear promotion and tenure processes, examine workload expectations, and provide access to mentorship programs.

### **Recommendations for faculty.**

***Recognize your work is important.*** We recognized that in order to maintain wellness in academia, we must value the work we do. Susan said, "The primary way I maintain wellness in academe is by believing what I do matters. Teaching always matters." Group members agreed when Susan noted, "We have to be responsible to ourselves and our own health first because, without this, we cannot do the work we are called to do."

***Engage in work and leisure activities you enjoy.*** In order to maintain wellness, participants felt individuals must continue to engage in work and leisure activities they enjoy. The writing group agreed with Monica who said, "In an academic environment, with all the pressure of deadlines, it is easy to give up on other activities that are important for us to have a work-life balance, such as Zumba, TV, walking, and talking." Robin said, "If I enjoy what I am doing, I feel well and balanced. But often I give up on what I enjoy in order to meet other people's demands and that's when I don't feel balanced." Individuals commented on the importance of engaging in a variety of enjoyable activities, with Robin saying, "There are a number of things that have allowed me to keep a level of sanity throughout my career, such as running, arts and crafts, and massage."

***Maintain relationships.*** Abbey wanted to, "remind junior faculty, like myself, to think about values and goals, and allow themselves to preserve time for what they value and set boundaries that support building and maintaining relationships." In discussing the importance of maintaining relationships, Abbey felt,

Having a strong connection with your community, friends and family provides you with a sense of balance, and the opportunity to participate in other roles, such as that of a volunteer, friend, sibling, caregiver, and parent, which may provide a sense of resiliency when faced with academic setbacks.

Alice's words also aligned with these sentiments,

One has to be engaged and motivated to be successful as an academic, one has to feel she is part of a supportive community, and one has to feel that she is contributing in a positive way to the overall functioning of the community.

Moreover, she noted, “Moving beyond the scope of your faculty or university can also be positive in terms of maintaining well-being. Networking with other individuals outside your university who work on topics and projects that are similar to yours can be beneficial.”

***Stay out of comparison and avoid competition.*** Our narratives addressed the negative implications of engaging in social comparison, with Abbey saying,

Although I never aspired to be a top-producing academic, I always found myself using them as my social barometer which resulted in me feeling lesser than... The problem is, in modeling my C.V., I only compared myself to those with superior academic performance.

Monica reflected on this culture of competition:

... the way academic life deems us as being successful is completely at odds with my philosophy of wholeness, healing, and contentment. For example, as a new faculty member, I have already started feeling the pressure of the tenure process. There is a sense of competition, which as educators we all know is unhealthy.

***Seek nature and water to calm you and take time to reflect.*** In order to maintain wellness as an academic, our narratives suggested that we should go back to the trees and seek water to calm us. Patricia believed that, “The trees encourage the stillness that is needed to recover the mind-body-spirit connection... [This] is critical to restoring balance and unity in ourselves and the world.” Narratives also addressed the benefits of taking time to reflect, with Alice commenting,

Another important strategy is to be self-reflective. This can take the form of keeping a personal/professional journal about how things unfold, why they unfold the way they do, and how things can be changed if you wish to change them.

Mary discussed the importance of considering one’s work style, saying, “I’ve come to understand that I’m most productive in the morning, least at night... I sometimes bring work home as a reassuring act, but truly know I’ll not touch it before the next morning.” Similarly, Patricia said, “Contemplation and meditative sensibility are a key tenet to a wellness way of being and a way to recover the unity of body, mind, spirit, and heart.”

### **Recommendations for universities.**

***Provide clear promotion and tenure processes.*** While narratives highlighted a desire to maintain work-life balance, June noted,

I was pressured to apply for research funding — I exhausted all sources that I knew of from the faculty, to university, to SSHRC. I was not pressured by anyone in particular but by the academic atmosphere I felt around me. Everyone had a PhD and everyone was competitive.

Narratives addressed the importance of having clear promotion and tenure processes so that individuals do not set unrealistic expectations for themselves. Robin said, "I don't have a boss who tells me what I should be doing." However, she elaborated, "I think we get our training in ignoring our own needs as doctoral students. We learn then how to drop our boundaries and be available for work all of the time." As a whole, we felt guidelines surrounding required roles and responsibilities would allow us to set boundaries. Robin said, "I take on and want to do too much, I get things done so people ask me to do more and I find it very difficult to say 'No' to people I like, especially graduate students."

**Examine workload expectations.** Narratives highlighted how difficult it is for academics to decline academic service. Robin said, "I was pressured into conducting a review of my program (work I do not enjoy). I tried hard to postpone the review (and all the course development afterwards) but was really pressured to do it." Narratives highlighted the importance of the academy respecting boundaries, as suggested by Roxanne,

I had to work extremely hard at learning to say "no" to requests for service... Recently my Dean asked me to sit on a committee I did not want to sit on... I said no four times, and then finally, because the Dean would not give up, I relented and agreed to serve.

Narratives addressed the stressors of having to document our work, and the realization that all of the work is not taken into account. Robin stated, "We apply for grants, send in proposals for book chapters, send queries for books, talk about books, papers with others, etc. Some of them are successful and others aren't." With this in mind, we felt promotion and tenure committees should consider all work, including successful and unsuccessful grant applications and publications. We also suggested institutions should promote wellness, with Theresa recommending that, "the [university] sponsor quality experiential wellness programs with convenient times and very knowledgeable leaders who offer individual counseling."

**Provide access to mentorship programs.** Narratives addressed the benefits of participating in a writing group, with Theresa noting, "The writing group in our faculty has been particularly helpful for me in regard to overcoming potential social isolation as an academic. Over several years, we've shared professional strategies and worked on collaborative research and publishing projects." Narratives emphasized the importance of mentorship, with Abbey saying, "I can see the value of having a formal mentorship program to help new faculty become acculturated to the norms and expectations of academe." While universities could facilitate this process, Alice stated, in regard to maintaining health and well-being in academia, "Another important strategy for new academics is to find a mentor who can be a sounding board for concerns, issues, successes, and challenges."

## Discussion

Wellness awareness is informed by the individual as well as the context. At an individual level, ever-increasing pressures and demands of academic life present many tensions for faculty members' ability to live and be well, including ongoing struggles to navigate expectations of publication and teaching,

while maintaining a healthy personal life. Work-life balance is often not achieved, as many academics experience a pull between personal and professional identities and demands. This leads to compromised productivity, little or ineffective student interaction, less involvement in departmental decision making, and overall decreased life satisfaction as it relates to work and workplace (Hill, 2004). Our results don't dismiss the importance of our work, but push forward a priority that wellness is connected to the integrity of our professional identities. Collegiality and richness of relationship can dilute tendencies to compare and compete.

Universities can be instrumental in promoting wellness in academe. Pre-tenured faculty, in particular, face the unique challenge that demands their availability for any and all opportunities that will influence their career trajectory (Hill, 2004). Furthermore, efforts made to avert overload by limiting academic or administrative responsibilities may negatively inform perceptions of commitment to scholarship. Within academic life, work-related stress is often linked to struggling to meet unrealistic expectations, including fast and efficient publication. This is frequently coupled with an immediate adjustment to the academic culture that involves multiple, simultaneous engaged roles. In addition to clear and supportive communication of the tenure process, university faculties can promote wellness as a systemic imperative. For example, universities can support pre-tenured faculty with mentorship initiatives that treat wellness as a key component of academic life.

When wellness becomes a focus in university contexts, faculty members feel better supported and are more likely to meet the demands of scholarship, research, and teaching. Faculties that are collegial and collaborative continue to produce innovative and engaged work, while also maintaining motivation among faculty. Co-created research offers opportunity for diverse thought, interdependent process, as well as increases in solidarity among like-minded peers (Christianakis, 2010). Collaborative learning and research communities encourage, what Hubball and West (2008) refer to as, interdependent and mutually supportive work environments that efficiently come together to meet institutional missions. As Lindholm and Szelényi (2008) concluded, it is critical that we “strive to develop habits of conducting our work and our lives in ways that promote both our own and others' well-being” (p. 36).

In terms of gender, Bonawitz and Andel (2009) suggested women in academia should not be silent about the stresses placed on them in the context of a society that continues to pressure women to be caregivers, as these gendered expectations for caregiving interfere with academic productivity, and contribute to increased stressors, fears, and conflict associated with successful promotion and tenure (Bonawitz & Andel, 2009; Penney et al., 2015; Pickett, 2017; Schoening, 2009; Wolf-Wendel & Ward, 2006). Given the psychological benefits of employment, it behooves universities to consider facilitating support groups to provide women academics with opportunities to develop supportive communities that foster collaboration in navigating the conflicting roles of parent, caregiver, and academic (Barnett & Baruch, 1985; Penney et al., 2015).

## Conclusions

We have shown that there are broader structural mechanisms that sustain unwellness and that, often, these mechanisms are invisible. The results are a normalizing of being unwell and a propensity for individualized solutions. We have found forming a writing group has allowed us to move beyond this normalized position. After all, we cannot all be the problem. The research literature on writing groups underscores the value of these types of groups in supporting new academics (Galligan et al., 2003; Lee & Boud, 2003; Morss & Murray, 2001).

Writing groups facilitate supportive colleagues and allow mentoring relationships to develop naturally. They help new faculty develop confidence and a sense of identity (Gillespie et al., 2005; Pasternak, Longwell-Grice, Shea, & Hanson, 2009). Research also indicates writing groups are especially beneficial for women academics (Grant & Knowles, 2010). We have found our writing group allowed us to see unwellness as something we experienced as a group, rather than an individual flaw. Moreover, it created the environment for multifaceted mentoring that included emotional support when appropriate. As a group, we have worked hard to create a safe environment for members (Badenhorst et al., 2013). We do not claim that writing groups are automatically centres of wellness; however, regular meetings and interactions remind us to resist the normalizing of unwellness and provide a collaborative space to support each other to live and be well in academia.

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### **About Memorial University's Faculty of Education Writing Group**

In 2009, a group of members from a Faculty of Education began meeting to share their writing and discuss the writing process. We meet regularly and each member takes a turn hosting the meeting. There are no strict deadlines and action items for the meetings; instead, each member takes a turn checking in with the group and asking for feedback or advice on their writing. It is a relaxed and open setting where networking and socializing are as welcome as producing results. The group deliberately set forth to create an environment of non-criticism—we can give feedback but not criticism and we agree to promote support, rather than competition. Through this process, the writing group has served to foster a sense of belonging.