Mindful Practices Affect Teacher Well-Being

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“Teachers are among the true culture heroes of our time.

Daily they must deal with children who have been damaged by social pathologies that no one else has the will to cure.

Daily they are berated by politicians, the public and the press for their alleged inadequacies and failures.

And daily they return to their classrooms, opening their hearts and minds in hopes of helping children do the same.

There has to be a way to support teachers’ resilience and hero-ness.”

~ Parker Palmer, 2007
The Courage to Teach
Good Morning!
Let the stress Begin
Rationale for Study

Record teacher burnout and turnover is bolstered by:

➢ intense pressures from standardized testing
➢ all-encompassing teacher evaluations
➢ increasingly complicated needs of students

The need is greater than ever to find effective means to support these hard-working teachers.

The well-being that teachers bring into their classrooms each day has a profound impact on their ability to reach, teach and support their students.
Rate of Turnover

The National Commission on Teaching and America’s Future gives this report:

- more than $\frac{1}{3}$ of all teachers leave after 3 years
- almost $\frac{1}{2}$ leave within their first 5 years.

These numbers have been steadily on the increase over the last 3 decades.

~ Kopkowski, 2012
Causes of Burnout

- Lack of personal engagement and genuine connection
- Emotional exhaustion
- Psychological distress

51% reported great stress 4 days a week in 2012 (up 70% since 1985)

- Job satisfaction (all-time low)

39% in 2012 compared to 62% in 2008

- Pressure, scrutiny and heightened accountability - linked to standardized tests.

~ Ward (2012) and Flook (2013)
The Cost and Impact of Turnover

More than one million classroom leaders endure job transition every year in the US. The estimated national price tag for this “teacher revolving door” is $7 billion annually.

~ Kopkowski, 2012

High attrition in schools not only impacts educator performance and success but also harms the school environment and student experience.

~ Ingersoll, 2012
So if they can stay...

According to Palmer (2007), teaching is a vocation that requires a **doling out of our inner selves**. It is the sum of heart, effort and care. True teaching emerges from one’s self, however that may be, for better or for worse.

Caring for the **teacher’s inner self** becomes critical for **endurance of the profession**.
Teacher Self Care

“As educators our secret weapon is our warm, open heart and our caring presence.” To keep our hearts warm and open requires that we care for ourselves first.

Teachers who create self-care habits and a means of enhancing inner resources are able to find balance in this heartful work.”

~ Tish Jennings

Mindfulness for Teachers
Mindfulness training has emerged across many disciplines as a means to manage and even reduce the negative effects of prolonged stress.

~ Flook, 2013

Mindfulness has been found to bolster the inner lives and performances of people living and working in stressful situations – even on the front lines of battle.

~ Stanley, USMC, 2007

Therefore mindfulness shows promise for doing the same for our teachers, on the front lines of schools.
Studies in Mindfulness
for Teachers

- Botwinik (2012) **Mindful, self-protective practices:**
  Self awareness, attention training, realistic limit-setting, boundary maintenance (clear shift from school to home), mindful movement & physical fitness – affected burnout rates.

- Frias (2015) After practicing **mindfulness**, a teacher noted that when facing a conflict, she **pauses and checks in on herself** – for what she is really feeling **in the moment** and chooses to **respond rather than react**.
Community Approach to Learning Mindfully

Jennings (2015) CALM program - 4 workshops/week over 16 weeks = significant benefits for educators:

- positive affect more often (in and out of school)
- better classroom management
- higher distress tolerance
- less physical symptoms
- lower blood pressure
“Mindfulness may be the simplest, safest and most effective way to promote the kindness and attention that we want for ourselves and for our children.” ~ Tim Ryan, US Congressman, Ohio
What is Mindfulness?

“Mindfulness is being present to your internal thoughts, emotions and sensations with a calm mind.”

~ Sam Himelstein, Ph.D.

“Mindfulness is slowing down and single-tasking.”

~ Christopher Willard, Ph.D.
Mindful Practices (a sample)
Retaining good teachers and providing them with strategies for **managing stress**, enhancing **well-being** and **integrating those qualities** into the classroom culture is the focus of this study.

**Research Question:**
Can a six-week **mindful practice program** of self-care positively affect the **well-being** of teachers?
Methods

Mindful Practices

- guided and individual practices
- 4 group sessions over a 6-week period
- resources to support a sustainable personal practice

2 Measurement Tools

- pre and post well-being surveys
- written reflections on well-being
Participants

Teachers / Participants:
- elementary school (K-6) in suburban district
- school enrolls 632 students, average class size is 20
- 16 full-time teachers volunteered (all female)
- 5+ years in the profession
- included classroom core, special education, reading support and physical education

Researcher / Instructor:
- 16 years classroom teaching (K-6), public and private
- 13 years practicing, teaching and training in mindfulness
Apparatus

**Wellness Works Survey for Educators (sample)**

1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = undecided, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree

My level of stress at work is manageable. 1 2 3 4 5
I feel the demands of this work are reasonable. 1 2 3 4 5
I maintain healthy connections with my students. 1 2 3 4 5
My night-time sleep is restorative. 1 2 3 4 5

**Written Reflection – Guide Questions (sample)**

How do you feel your personal practice is coming along?
What are the bright spots to these practices?
What are some road-blocks that you have encountered?
Procedure

Group Session Components:

1) Introduction to Mindful Practices for Teachers
2) Breath Awareness – Checking In
3) Nervous System Stress Response
4) Mind/Body Awareness
   - Posture
   - Movement
   - Resting
Results

After the 6-week period, 10 teachers responded with completed pre and post Surveys and as well as Reflections.

Baseline averages were somewhat high *(agree)* on the Well-being Survey (3.92 out of 5), possibly indicating that the teachers’ sense of well-being started out quite solid.

The results of this study do show some improvement relating to helpful traits with the greatest change.
My frustration threshold is satisfactory.

I am responsive rather than reactive when dealing with my students.

I can start, focus and follow-through on tasks as needed.

I have the right amount of energy for my lifestyle.

My level of stress at work is manageable.

I have self-care routines that help me maintain inner balance.

My night-time sleep is restorative.
Written Reflections

- How do you feel your **personal practice** is coming along?
  
  *I was using more at school, not as much in my personal/family life.*
  
  *Summer vacation will give me more time to try them.*

- What are the **bright spots** to these practices /this program?
  
  *My days after the mornings we practiced as a group were less stressful.*
What are some road-blocks that you have encountered regarding the practices?

Time.

It took me a while to find which practices came naturally for me.

Audio practices would be great. I don’t do well on my own.

I need more time in group sessions. I love doing this work with my friends.
Implications

As other studies have shown, mindfulness practices integrated into the lives of teachers can impact well-being.

When time for self-care is given a high priority, the effects may prove more prominent.
Time Implications

**Time** is invaluable in all school settings. **Time** is also a critical piece in helping teachers with their own self-care.

Caregivers often need to be given **permission** as well as **time** to care for themselves.

We are currently piloting a **year-long, teacher training** with **12 hours** of guided group practice.

Maybe **time** will tell.
Future Sharing

Research Symposiums at Education Conferences:

- Mindfulness in Education Network (2017)
- IU13 Annual Education Conference (2017)
- UCSD Medical School – Mindfulness in Education (2018)

Future Presentations to District Administrators:

- Elizabethtown Area School District
- Penn Manor School District
- School District of Lancaster
Wellness Works in Schools
Began in 2001 in the School District of Lancaster, PA

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