

Remembering to Breathe: The Challenges and Rewards of Teaching Mindfulness Practices to Pre-Service Teachers

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ABSTRACT: This paper reports on a pilot study conducted to investigate the effectiveness of mindfulness-based program in reducing stress and enhancing emotion regulation skills for a cohort of undergraduate students completing their pre-service teaching experience. The intent of the present paper is to highlight the advantages of incorporating a mindfulness component into pre-service teacher training programs for university faculty who train and prepare these students for their culminating student teaching field experience. The purpose of incorporating mindfulness into the weekly seminar time was to provide students with the training to learn to let go of the worry, let go of the doubt, and just *be* for a short time.

Keywords: mindfulness, stress reduction, student teaching, presence

RESUMÉ: Une étude pilote a été menée sur l'efficacité d'un programme élaboré sur « la pleine conscience », afin de réduire le stress et d'améliorer les capacités à maîtriser ses émotions. Ce programme est destiné à une cohorte d'étudiants du premier cycle qui terminent leur initiation à l'enseignement. L'intention est de faire ressortir les avantages de l'intégration de « la pleine conscience » dans le programme d'initiation aux enseignants, pour les professeurs qui les forment et qui les préparent à terminer leur expérience dans le domaine pédagogique. Le but de l'intégration de la « pleine conscience » dans le séminaire hebdomadaire, était d'apprendre aux étudiants, en plus de la formation, la manière de ne plus s'inquiéter, de ne plus douter et d'être juste conscient du moment présent.

Mots-clés: *pleine conscience, diminution du stress, pédagogie, présence*

The pre-service teaching experience, or “student teaching,” has been described as “teaching with training wheels” (Pena & Almaguer, 2007). This metaphor is perfect; but let’s look closer at

those training wheels. Envision a child, mounting a two-wheel bike for the first time *without* the training wheels. Who else is in that picture? Can you see an adult running alongside the bike, there to provide the support essential for the child to successfully transition to cycling independently? In student teaching, as the pre-service teacher begins to take more responsibility for the classroom, there are supports on both sides of the bike; the cooperating teacher at the school site, and an academic supervisor from the university. These support people are in place because if the “child on the bike” is scared, or hesitant to pedal consistently enough to gain momentum, he or she will hear a voice offering encouragement, “look ahead, stay focused, and just keep pedaling, I’m right here.” The pre-service students who are about to embark on their journey as student teachers need similar encouraging support.

In my role as a student teaching supervisor, I’ve listened to many students share how stressed and nervous they were prior to the start of their student teaching placement. In an honest appraisal of what I had offered students to help them manage the emotional roller coaster of student teaching, I realized I needed to do more. I discussed the importance of self-care: proper rest, nutrition, and balance. I stressed preparation and professionalism. I advised them to focus on the students in an effort to forget about their own apprehension. I shared letters from former student teachers as well as my own wobbly start, but that was about the extent of my guidance.

I could see that students needed more effective ways to manage their stress, so in the fall of 2014, I incorporated a more formal approach for dealing with stress to help my students successfully manage the student teaching experience. I integrated a formal mindfulness program, *Learning to Breathe*, into my student teaching seminars. In this program, student teachers learned techniques to breathe through their stress, tame their anxiety, and better manage the apprehension that accompanies the start of their pre-service placement.

My perception of high levels of stress and apprehension in pre-service teachers and the need to provide better support to them during this time, was confirmed in the literature. Chaplain (2008) identified the student teaching semester as the most stressful experience during professional preparation. It is a rigorous semester, with competing projects and demands. At my university, student teaching is the culminating requirement for degree completion and certification, entailing 15 weeks under the guidance and supervision of an experienced cooperating teacher as well as additional supervision from by an academic supervisor

from the university. Student teaching is also the culmination of one's undergraduate college career, signaling forthcoming entry into the adult world of work. Pre-service teachers face a daunting developmental task: the transformation from student to teacher with all the challenges that entails. Further, the costs of failure are high. A teacher candidate cannot be certified without successfully completing the student teaching semester and obtaining a passing score on state mandated certification tests. Thus, future employment opportunities are tied to practicum success (Caires, Almeida, & Martins, 2010) and this pivotal experience serves as the gateway to a student's chosen professional career. This career step brings with it job-related stressors such as managing multiple, and often competing demands, maintaining the rapid pace of the daily work week schedule (the first full-time, five days per week employment experience for many students) as well as processing almost continuous feedback and evaluation from both the university and school personnel.

Several studies confirm that the pre-service teaching experience can be daunting (Pena & Almaguer, 2007) and many student teachers experience moderate to severe levels of stress (Clement, 1999; Enz & Carlile, 1997; Schwebel, Schwebel, Schwebel, & Schwebel, 1992). Multiple factors contribute to this stress (MacDonald, 1993; Miller & Fraser, 2000; Montgomery & Rupp, 2005; Sumsion & Thomas, 1999), including workload, practice teaching, financial pressures, and interpersonal conflicts (Kyriacou & Kunc, 2007). In their struggle to do it all right, pre-service teachers may often feel overwhelmed and underprepared and these elements contribute to student teachers feeling stressed and even burned out before entering the profession as fully qualified teachers (Gold & Batchelor, 2001).

The transition for a pre-service student, from student, to neophyte teacher entails a significant change in role expectations. They transition from their relatively passive role as students in a college classroom to active teachers in the K-12 classroom. Most teacher preparation programs have preliminary field based courses in which the pre-service teachers assume some responsibility for the teaching lessons, but it is not until they are full time student teachers that they are required to assume complete responsibility for the classroom including management of the students, planning of content and lessons to be taught, and evaluation of student performance.

The student teaching semester at our university is somewhat unique because it is primarily field-based but also includes academic requirements (e.g. research papers, capstone project,

weekly seminar, etc.) beyond the considerable duties associated with student teaching. Multiple observers (university supervisors, cooperating teachers, and occasionally principals) evaluate student teachers frequently. These evaluations will influence whether students successfully complete their pre-service teaching experience. As a result, students often feel a need to conform to their supervisor's or cooperating teacher's instruction and management style, in part because they have an ambiguous role within the classroom and school community (MacDonald, 1993). If this style is drastically different than the teacher candidates, it can be another source of stress. The cooperating teacher may also be overwhelmed, adding to the stress of the pre-service teacher. Thus, the teacher candidates' first glimpse into the "real world" of the career they have chosen can be a rude awakening.

Learning to Breathe (L2B)

In order to provide additional support for my cohort of student teachers, I researched a variety of stress reduction programs and selected *Learning to BREATHE: Gaining the Inner Edge* (L2B; Broderick, 2013; Broderick & Frank, 2014), a six-week mindfulness curriculum modeled, in part, on the Kabat-Zinn (1990, 2013) Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction Program. I have my own personal mindfulness practice and have attended numerous retreats for education professionals who work to bring mindfulness into K-12 classrooms for both teachers and students. After participating in two L2B trainer workshops led by the program's developer (Broderick, 2013), I felt this would be the best program for the student teachers. A key focus of the program is to help students identify patterns that trigger emotional reactivity and to teach strategies including mindfulness awareness practice to manage stress and enhance emotion regulation.

To help manage the stress of student teaching, the students need effective emotion regulation skills. Emotion regulation is a construct rooted in developmental psychology, and is broadly described as the ability to recognize, identify, acknowledge, and flexibly manage both the experiential and the expressive aspects of emotion (Broderick, 2013; Campos, Frankel, & Camras, 2004, Eisenberg, Spinrad, & Eggum, 2010, Gross, 1998).

The purpose of incorporating L2B into the weekly seminar time was to provide students with the training to learn to just breathe, let go of the worry, let go of the doubt, and just *be* for a short time. We anticipated that learning and applying the strategies of the L2B program would lead to students reporting

lower levels of stress, greater self-compassion, and an enhanced ability to manage negative emotions.

The pre-service teachers who participated in the study had completed approximately four years in a rigorous undergraduate teacher preparation program in one of two areas: Pre-K through grade four (early grades) or grades four through eight (middle grades) and were in their final academic semester. All participants had spent 194 hours in field experiences in classrooms in their certification area prior to this semester and were completing their required, semester long, pre-service student teachings placements in suburban public school districts.

The project began in Spring 2014, when the 10 teacher candidates scheduled to complete their student teaching in the school district assigned to me for the upcoming fall semester were contacted. This contact was intended to determine students' interest in participating in a mindfulness-training program during their pre-service teaching semester. All students expressed interest in participating and I met with them over the summer to describe the mindfulness-training program more fully. I also explained that students who agreed to participate would also be asked to complete questionnaires about their experiences to measure the effectiveness of the mindfulness program. All students indicated continued willingness to participate and these students were then enrolled in my section of the required academic seminar. We also recruited another cohort of students scheduled to begin their student teaching at the same time to serve as the control or comparison group. No compensation or incentives were provided to participants in either group.

Learning to Breathe (L2B) is a mindfulness-based curriculum developed for a classroom or group setting and designed to enhance emotional regulation and competency, expand options for managing stress, and cultivating compassion, gratitude, and other positive emotions. Since the development of the program in 2003, *L2B* has been implemented in a variety of settings including private and public schools, clinical settings, and after-school programs (Bluth, Roberson, & Gaylord, 2015, Broderick & Frank, 2014; Broderick & Metz, 2009; Broderick, Pinger, & Worthen, 2013; Metz et al., 2013). The program, recognized by the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), meets the research criteria for effective social emotional learning programs.

The L2B program provides a session-by-session guide and each lesson includes discussion, activities, and opportunities to practice mindfulness skills in a group setting. Lesson content takes

approximately 45 minutes to implement and focuses on six core themes: (a) body awareness; (b) understanding and working with thoughts; (c) understanding and working with feelings; (d) integrating awareness of thoughts, feelings, and bodily sensations; (e) reducing harmful self-judgments and practicing compassion; and (f) integrating mindful awareness into daily life. Each weekly session includes a presentation of the weekly topic, group activities illustrating the lesson theme, guided discussion, and mindfulness practice. The core practices of the program include body scan, loving kindness practice, and mindfulness of thoughts, emotions, and movement. In addition to the in-class sessions, students were given L2B workbooks and CDs containing guided recordings created by the program's developer for home independent mindfulness practice. Students were also sent weekly mindfulness reminders via email on Sunday evenings. The reminder consisted of a short phrase or sentence based on the weekly lesson such as "remember to breathe."

L2B was originally developed for use with adolescents, so program activities were modified slightly for use with our college age, student teacher cohort. For example, an activity designed to demonstrate a "chattering mind" used a practice example from the mandatory Praxis teacher certification test and the roles of the participants in the activity were changed to professors, cooperating teachers, and other evaluating supervisors. Dr. Broderick, the developer of the program, also served as a training consultant during the course of the project.

The L2B sessions were held in a room on campus and students were provided with yoga mats for the guided meditations in which students were cued to lie down and get comfortable. In the first few classes, as I entered the room, I found the students seated silently against the wall, sitting on their unrolled mats. I would prompt them to unroll their mat and get comfortable. They did so slowly, almost hesitantly. Initially, the group didn't feel cohesive or comfortable. There was not the usual chattiness before seminar began that I was used to from other seminar groups. This felt awkward, and since it was my first time facilitating the L2B, a bit disconcerting for me as well.

The flow of the program allowed for review, activities correlated with the theme, discussion, and then formal mediation practice. I noticed that breaking the students into small groups or pairs, led to that reassuring hum of activity that signals engaged students. Like many other educators, my goal is to see active, engaged students in the classroom. I had to keep reminding myself though, that engagement isn't always audible or visible; sometimes

it's happening inside. I recognized I was slightly uncomfortable, often wondering if students were comfortable participating in the guided meditation.

Slowly, however, I started seeing signs that students were benefiting from the mindfulness exercises. For example, one student would occasionally walk to my car with me after our weekly session. She would comment on how valuable she found the practices, which always surprised me. I would have never known by her demeanor, which was quiet and reserved. A lesson I seem to be continually learning is that you can rarely know for sure what others are thinking or feeling.

In addition to what was happening in the L2B training sessions, students started practicing focused breathing before they began teaching lessons in their own classrooms, thus beginning to transfer what they had learned in the program to their daily student teaching life. At the post-conferences students would comment on noticing when they were nervous, and at what point in their lesson they began to relax. They often made reference to "breathing through their nervousness." Students began sending me unsolicited e-mails illustrating how L2B was making a difference in their daily lives.

"The night before my PECT exam I was feeling very anxious and nervous for the three sections I had to take. I decided that I was not going to look over any more material and I was just going to relax because I wasn't going to know anymore than I had already studied. The first thing that crossed my mind when I thought of relaxing was to meditate like I had learned during seminar during our learning to breathe sessions. I got my yoga mat out, put the CD in, threw on my headphones and meditated. After I meditated I went to bed feeling relaxed and ready to conquer my certification tests. I truly believe meditating relaxed my nerves and prepared me to do my absolute best on my exams."

"The learning to breathe program is exactly what I need after my long day during student teaching. To have the ability to sit back, reflect on my day and collaborate with other student teachers is beneficial. As a student who struggles with anxiety, the learning to breathe program helped me to realize that you have to take time for yourself to just breathe once in a while."

"I just wanted to let you know how much I enjoyed today's seminar and how extremely lucky I am to have the opportunity to "learn to breathe each week". I think it is a blessing that I was put in this seminar group. I have struggled with anxiety for years and the activities we did today were unbelievably stress relieving and I was able to put my personal life aside and have fun for an hour. Thanks

for doing what you do. I wanted to let you know that it is noticed what a great program you are running.”

Although the program supported many students, in retrospect, there were challenges. We know as educators, that it takes practice to refine the craft of teaching or facilitating a new program and this was the first time I facilitated the L2B program. A facilitator with more experience might have led a session with greater awareness and students could have benefited more. The question of how much experience is required to successfully facilitate a mindfulness-training program and other questions about the competencies of mindfulness meditation instructors and how to measure instructor impact are currently under debate (Crane et al., 2012; Davidson & Kaszniak, 2015).

There were also other challenges involving the implementation of the program, the most apparent, was the lack of time. The L2B program was incorporated into the two-hour weekly seminar. Half of the seminar was spent on L2B implementation, and the other half was spent on more traditional seminar activities: scheduling, post-observation discussion, certification paperwork, instructional questions and review of assignments. There was limited time to clarify questions regarding the L2B program as well as to reflect and discuss the at-home optional practice component.

Lessons Learned

Allow time for transitions: The student teachers entered the classroom after a full day of teaching. They looked tired, and a bit uncomfortable. In my quest to get everything done, I did not allow enough time for them to transition from their field assignment (a classroom full of elementary age students), to a seminar in which the time was divided between the practicality of signing observations, scheduling next future observations, and then expecting them to sit quietly and meditate. It felt rushed. I also needed more time to transition. I was sprinting across campus from advising, with no time to center myself. I needed some quiet time alone, to reflect on my intention for my students, and to catch my breath. We all needed a few minutes to decompress.

Environment considerations: Our L2B sessions were held adjacent to the student cafeteria. The dinner odors were always apparent, and the sounds of plates clanging, college students conversing and laughing, as well as the hustle and bustle of food preparation were all distractors. I could have used meditation music to mute some of the outside sounds, and possibly used a

peppermint spray or a diffuser to mask the food odors. I often provided food, but we rarely had enough time to eat it. Delegating the first ten minutes of seminar as time to eat mindfully and gather our thoughts, would have been a beautiful contemplative experience.

Comfort Matters: We were all dressed professionally. Changing into more comfortable clothes could have allowed the students to be more relaxed during the mindfulness exercises, especially during the body scan and the meditations in which they were invited to lie down. I also think changing our attire would have sent a message that this time was different than the usual classroom situation they were accustomed to.

Be present and flexible: I was implementing the L2B curriculum with a great deal of fidelity since it was my first time facilitating the program. As a teacher trainer, I know it's hard to modify content until you have taught it the first time. The more I teach contemplative practices, the more comfortable I am, and as a result, so are my students. In retrospect, I wasn't as present as I could have been, and I am aware of what a difference that can make in the quality of any teaching experience.

Connect to their current context: More of the L2B lessons could have been customized to connect more meaningfully with their current stressors. For example, many were beginning to have anxiety about the impending job search. Incorporating L2B strategies to discuss their anxiety would have been a seamless connection. Also, discussing when the student teachers' lessons didn't go as planned, and the way in which your inner critic can hijack your thoughts would have been very appropriate. Once again, the lack of time seemed to be a factor.

Future Directions

A subsequent pilot study (*Pathways to Presence: Healthy Habits for Educators*) is being offered to a new cohort of student teachers. This training will be provided prior to the start of the pre-service teaching experience, rather than running concurrently with the student teaching semester, as occurred here. It will take place during the summer, in a more relaxed environment. Beginning two semesters before the pre-service teachers are student teaching should better prepare the students to implement and practice the strategies they will learn. This study will provide strategies for stress reduction by promoting self-care and an inner awareness. Learning these strategies prior to student teaching will provide students with the opportunity to practice the tools they learn so they can have a toolbox of strategies to choose from during their

student teaching semester and as they transition to in-service teaching. One of the intentions of this future study is to follow these students throughout their student teaching and as they move on to in-service teaching positions. This will further establish whether mindfulness programs can be effective for pre-service teachers and in-service teachers.

When beginning anything as a novice, few are good; if anything, they are far from competent. Teacher candidates often wonder, "What if I'm not good enough to be a real teacher, what in the world will I do?" If we could prepare teachers who were able to model and embody the particular qualities that mindfulness helps develop, such as non-judgment, openness and flexibility, would they experience less anticipatory stress?

Considering the impact of stress on current teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2001; Kyriacou, 2001) and the importance of healthy emotion management skills in the teaching profession (Sutton & Wheatley, 2003; Sutton, 2004), helping pre-service teachers develop methods for managing stress and negative emotions should be a top priority in Faculties of Education.

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