**Mind-Body Tools for Teachers: A Proposal for Incorporating Mindfulness Techniques into Teacher Education**

by [Andrea Hyde](http://www.tcrecord.org/AuthorDisplay.asp?aid=21881) — September 28, 2015  
  
*This is a proposal to teach classroom-based mindfulness techniques to teacher education candidates as part of their teacher education programs. While mindfulness, including yoga and meditation, is growing more popular in a range of educational settings, the majority of K-12 programs are delivered to schools through external personnel from yoga or mindfulness service organizations. In many cases, these programs are provided at low or no cost to schools, or individual teachers might take trainings ranging from about $600-$2500. A more sustainable, affordable and ethical scenario would be to develop the capacities of teachers to employ mindfulness techniques for their own wellbeing, and that of their students, during their teacher education programs.*

BACKGROUND

This commentary is a proposal to teach classroom-based mindfulness techniques to preservice teacher candidates as part of their teacher education programs. I have prepared this proposal based on the work I have done in aligning school-based yoga curricula with state standards, national standards and initiatives (Hyde & Spence, 2013) as well as my work in teacher education in Illinois. This proposal is informed by my own scholarship in school-based yoga and mindfulness programs (Hyde, 2012) and in consultation with others who are working with yoga and mindfulness programs in schools, researching mindfulness and teaching. While mindfulness, including yoga and meditation, is growing more popular in a range of educational settings, the majority of K-12 programs are delivered to schools through external personnel from yoga or mindfulness service organizations. In many cases, these programs are provided at low or no cost to schools, or individual teachers who might attend training at costs ranging from $600-$2500. A more sustainable, affordable, and ethical scenario would be to develop the capacities of teachers to employ mindfulness techniques for their own well-being—and that of their students—during their teacher education programs.

SCHOOL-BASED MINDFULNESS PROGRAMS

Mindfulness is “the awareness that emerges through paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally to the unfolding of experience” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). In a mindful state, we are more consciously aware of ourselves and what (or who) we are engaged with. This offers us time to recognize, experience, and reflect on our thoughts, ideas, judgments, and feelings in a non-reactive way. When we shift attention inward, our brain waves slow down and the right brain is activated for greater creativity (Siegel, 2007). This practice allows us to feel more peaceful, and, when practiced regularly, to develop self-awareness and self-regulation (Vago & Silbersweig, 2012).

Mindfulness programs that involve the secular practice of yoga and meditation are increasingly more common in schools. They appear as self-care classes and resiliency building classes for teachers; as health and physical education, learning readiness, social-emotional learning, and prosocial behavior interventions for students. These programs teach mind-body exercises, found to help students focus their attention, reduce stress, and increase self-regulatory behavior (Davidson et al., 2012; Flook et al., 2010; Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Mendelson et.al., 2010; Napoli, Krech, & Holley, 2005; Oberle et al., 2012; Razza, Bergen-Cico, & Raymond, 2013). This last item, self-control, has recently gained attention as psychologists have found it to be one of the greatest predictors of school success (Baumeister & Tierney, 2012). These same practices have been found to increase teachers’ occupational well-being (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012), reduce stress, decrease burnout (Jennings et al., 2013; Laravee, 2012), and increase self-regulation and self-compassion (Frank et al., 2013).

This benefit alone would be a compelling reason to provide mindfulness instruction to pre-service teachers. Job satisfaction for teachers is at an all-time low (Markow et al., 2013) and teachers experience high levels of occupational stress because of how much they care and how much they are taught to care about the students they serve (Laravee, 2012). A recent study of the reasons for teacher attrition notes that 42% of teachers leave the profession each year. Those teachers who received the least amount of instruction in teaching strategies were the most likely to leave (Ingersoll et al., 2014). Public school teachers are beset with increasing demands for implementing standardized curriculum and assessing students’ performance. We must do whatever we can to affect progressive change against over-testing and scrutiny, and promote teacher autonomy and professionalization. Teacher educators should find a way to support and promote teachers’ resiliency if we want them to have the best chance of surviving the profession.

Mindfulness practices, well supported by brain sciences1 and field-tested for feasibility and satisfaction by teachers (Jennings, 2015), also align well with state and national social-emotional learning standards, health and physical education standards, Universal Design for Learning, classroom management, school safety/anti-bullying programs, and wellness/anti-obesity initiatives. They further help to fulfill a new coordinated school health model which incorporates the ASCD’s whole child principles (ASCD, 2007; 2014). Chronicled most recently in Tish Jennings’ (2015) *Mindfulness for Teachers*, teachers who practice mindfulness are more aware of their own emotions, more skillful in working with stress, more efficient in planning and delivering lessons, and can, therefore, be more effective in responding to individual students and orchestrating classroom dynamics. Teachers who are good at regulating their emotions are more likely to display higher job satisfaction (Brackett et al, 2010). Mention of mindfulness practice is virtually non-existent in teacher education. We have been making some slight progress, in attending to social-emotional learning for the students they teach.

MINDFULNESS AND SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL LEARNING

In 2003, in response to a concern for untreated children’s mental health problems, and recognizing that “[c]hildren's social development and emotional development are essential underpinnings to school readiness and academic success,” the State of Illinois passed the Children's Mental Health Act (Illinois Department of Healthcare and Family Services, 2003), thereby, establishing Social Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards for grades K-12. SEL has been defined as the process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions (CASEL, 2014).  
  
Very few other states have followed in establishing SEL standards for K-12, though most states have adopted SEL standards for preschool (Dusenbury et al., 2014). It is not surprising to learn, then, that very few teacher education programs provide pre-service training for their candidates in the social-emotional learning of students or in cultivating their own SEL capacities (Schonert-Reichl & Zakrzewski, 2014), though most teachers say that they want it (Civic Enterprises, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Hariharan, 2013). This is unfortunate as SEL programs for students are most effective when teachers receive training in developing their own social-emotional competencies (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings, 2011; Jones et al., 2013).  
  
Mindfulness practices can be a simple, practical, enjoyable, and effective way to introduce social-emotional learning (Davidson & Begley, 2012; CASEL, 2012). Mindfulness practices strengthen attention. Daniel Goleman (2013a; 2013b) explains self-awareness as cuing into signals that originate in the body, but that are hard to detect. Stress states are associated with hormones that cause the amygdala to hijack the rest of the brain, affecting memory and rational (evaluative) decision making, in preparation for fight or flight. This means that those with high stress have very little to none of their brain available for traditional academic learning in a classroom setting, which takes a sizeable amount of focus and concentration. According to a report by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child (2006)

When feelings are not well managed, thinking can be impaired . . . in terms of basic brain functioning, emotions support executive functions when they are well regulated, but interfere with attention and decision making when they are poorly controlled (p. 3).

Simple training in attention via mindfulness techniques—such as breathing exercise—can reduce stress, calm, and focus students; it has even been found to reduce the effects of trauma associated with poverty (Bose, 2013). Children living in poverty exhibit symptoms of what the National Child Traumatic Stress Network calls secondary traumatic stress (NCTSN, 2011). Among the recommendations for the prevention and treatment of secondary traumatic stress are self-care groups (for example, yoga or meditation) and mindfulness training. Those working in yoga service organizations that serve the majority of poor Black and Hispanic youth are seeing the possibilities that mindfulness—especially mindful movement—has for developing positive school behaviors and coping skill which could help to prevent drop outs (Walton, 2013).

MINDFULNESS IN EDUCATION: A NEW FIELD

The new, interdisciplinary field of mindfulness in education needs time to develop a solid body of systematic inquiry based on recommendations for best practices in program design, implementation, and evaluation. What the small amount of research on mindfulness programs in U.S., K-12 schools does seem to indicate is that program success—meeting common objectives central to improved classroom environments and individual instances of emotional regulation of self-reports of reductions in stress or improvements in mood, focus, or attitudes toward school—is conditioned by the quality of implementation. Markers of high quality implementation include fidelity, consistency, and educator competency (Lawlor, 2014). Competency is connected to the amount of training in contemplative practices. Put simply—students do better when their teachers practice the skills that they teach and believe in their effectiveness. Program design and teaching methods must take into consideration personal and social contexts, such as levels of maturity, experiences, personality, and culture (Broderick & Frank, 2014). However, the person who delivers the program is more important than the program itself (Harris, 2013). For this reason, it seems that a teacher’s professional education should include training in classroom-based mindfulness skills.  
  
Teacher quality is an important factor in students’ educational experiences and their attitudes about school, as well as their academic success (Bergin & Bergin, 2009; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Mashburn et al., 2008; Rimm-Kaufman et al., 2003). Research on mindfulness-based teacher training suggests 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” (Meiklejohn, et al., 2012, p. 292). Frias (2015) found that effects on practice for teachers who practice mindfulness have the most bearing on the quality of their relationships with their students, and their ability to manage their own stress. Others have found that perhaps the best way to secure the success of mindfulness-based interventions for students is for their teachers to learn mindfulness first (Zenner, Herrnlebens-Kurz & Walach, 2014). It improves their own resiliency and prevents burnout (Roeser et al., 2012; Frank et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2013).

PROPOSAL FOR INCORPORATING MINDFULNESS TECHNIQUES INTO TEACHER EDUCATION

While excellent mindfulness training programs exist, online and in retreat-like settings. Pre-service teachers should have at least cursory information about the benefits of mindfulness; and some basic instruction in mindfulness practices before they enter their own classrooms. The remainder of this paper outlines a proposal to teach classroom-based mindfulness techniques, tentatively called Mind-Body Tools for Teachers (MBTT)2. The proposal is written to align with the requirements of Illinois Teacher Education Programs (TEP), but could be adapted to the standards and assessments of other states3. The tools include breathing exercises, body postures and movements, games and activities, and relaxation techniques.  
  
Breathing exercises provide us with a neutral point of focus for directing awareness. By purposefully breathing, we can excite or calm the central nervous system, reducing stress or lifting depression. Complete (slow, deliberate, full) breathing reduces stress, having a beneficial effect on every system in the body.

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Simple body postures and movements integrate, soothe, and energize the body and mind by releasing tension and stress, activating coordination and awareness, and stimulating circulation. Mindful movement develops awareness, strength, flexibility, balance, coordination, and focus.

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Mindful games and activities release mental tension and explore physical challenges in a noncompetitive way that enhances fitness, teamwork skills, and creative thinking.

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Relaxation exercises bring the mind into the body. This slows down the nervous system, activating the relaxation response (Benson, 2000), a physical state of deep rest that changes the physical and emotional responses to stress. These exercises can be done sitting up or lying down, in silence, or accompanied by a guided meditation script or music.

PHASE I  
  
All teacher education students4 will be encouraged to5 (or will be required to6) take the *free* MBTT Core Workshop in a two-hour, face-to-face format, at least once before graduating from their program. The MBTT Core Workshops will focus on developing teacher candidates’ understanding of social-emotional knowledge and skills. They will receive an introduction to mindfulness techniques to develop resilience, self-care, compassion, and self-control (focused awareness, stress, reduction, positive thinking) for themselves; and strategies to support the development of this social-emotional learning. Faculty trained in mindfulness or yoga for education would conduct these workshops. With teacher educators who are also trained in mindfulness techniques, this plan would require a modest initial investment in the specialized training of interested faculty who have—or are willing to adopt—a mindfulness practice.  
  
PHASE II  
  
In addition to the Core Workshop, all students will have access to *optional* online modules that provide specific content for their area of interest: for example, Early Childhood, Counseling, Educational Leadership, English as a Second Language/Bilingual Education, Music & Art, or Kinesiology (which may want their own face-to-face module on yoga as PE). Because of the transdisciplinary nature of MBTT, this effort should eventually enlist the expertise of faculty (and graduate students) from other departments in the incorporation of mindfulness techniques into all university teacher education programs. Ideally, the modules would be developed in partnership with faculty members who are content experts for the TEP.  
  
ALIGNMENT WITH STANDARDS  
  
Below, you can see that the objectives of the MBTT Core Workshop are aligned with the Illinois Social-Emotional Learning Standards7 (Table 1) and the Illinois Learning Standards for Physical Development and Health. The latter have recently been revised as a diffused model of physical activity that would integrate physical activity throughout the school day, in addition to dedicated Physical Education. The tools introduced in the workshop are practical ways of meeting this new format. Finally, by providing instructional strategies for student self-regulation, the workshop is aligned with Guideline #9 of Universal Design for Learning (CAST, 2011). Practices used to address all three sets of standards have been shown to contribute to more successful classroom management and a pro-social behavioral climate. This training would help to prepare candidates to fulfill the highest expectations of teacher evaluation (adopted for the State of Illinois) in Charlotte Danielson’s (2007) Framework for Teaching, Domain 2: Classroom Environment.

MBTT AND THE REVISED IL LEARNING STANDARDS FOR PHYSICAL DEVELOPMENT AND HEALTH (ENHANCED P. E.)

The Illinois Enhance Physical Education (P. E.) Task Force, created by Public Act 97-1102 (August 2012), revised and extended the Illinois Learning Standards for Physical Development and Health. The updates reflect current research in neuroscience emphasizing the relationship between fitness and learning. A report released by this body on August 28, 2013 recommends planning for implementing the revised standards in 2014-2015 with complete implementation in 2015-2016 (Illinois Enhance Physical Education Task Force, 2013). The Task Force primarily focused on physical education, “but also identified resources that classroom teachers can use to incorporate physical activity into lessons to support learning and behavior goals” (2013, p. 6). Adopting the new goals from this report for enhanced P.E. would mean integrating physical activity throughout the school day.  
  
Classroom-based mindful movement, yoga in particular, would complement dedicated Health and Physical Education classes, recess, and intramural or competitive sports programs, under this newly imagined enhanced P.E. model. As part of an outreach and engagement strategy, the Task Force encourages promotion of enhanced P.E. programs to “superintendents, principals, school boards, P.E., and adapted P.E. teachers and coordinators, non-PE teachers (e.g., academic, arts, and other non-P.E. teachers), parents, and students” (2013, p. 1). Page Seven of the report states: in order to permanently implement enhanced P.E. in Illinois, academic, and training institutions will need to adapt their curricula to meet the revised learning standards and ensure future teachers, school administrators, and others are comfortable teaching and promoting enhanced physical education.  
  
Page Three of the Illinois Enhance Physical Education Task Force’s final report (2013) includes a chart listing of an enhanced P. E. Program. Mind-Body Tools for Teachers could promote the enhanced P.E. model to teacher education candidates and could address the following goals for students, with regard to:

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Curriculum: fitness activities, individual lifetime activities

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Grouping: all students have an opportunity for success

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Fitness Emphasis: students design an individual program based on personal goals; students learn to maintain and improve their own fitness to optimize health and well-being; students understand how levels of fitness affect health and cognitive function

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Instruction: teacher as coach/guide; students progress at individual pace and self-assess

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Social Skills: students develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success; students use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships; students demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts

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Grading and Assessment: based on self-improvement, self-assessment; used to monitor and reinforce student learning

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Games: emphasis on participation and getting everyone active

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Technology: other fitness technology (e.g., apps)

ASSESSMENT

It is essential for all programs to undergo continual evaluation from both internal and external sources as outlined in Table 2. Data from workshop participants can also be collected at several levels. A mechanism for collecting and analyzing user feedback from the online modules could be included as part of the course development process. Results should be used to continually improve the program and to ensure that program goals are met in the most effective way.

CONCLUSION

There are, of course, other ways to go about incorporating mind-body tools in teacher education, such as integrating practices into already existing courses. For example, following the State of Illinois’ revised Standards for Physical Development and Health, some courses such as kinesiology already integrate yoga for children and teens along with classroom-based mindful movement techniques. These resources could be used to support learning and behavior goals and to incorporate physical activity throughout the school day.  
  
Likewise, in the process of developing teacher candidates’ understanding of social-emotional knowledge and skills, some courses in educational psychology or classroom management include some basic neuroscience and candidates receive an introduction to mindfulness techniques (mind-body tools) to develop resilience, self-care, compassion, and self-control (focused awareness, stress, reduction, positive thinking) for themselves; and strategies to support the development of this social-emotional learning in their students.  
  
This proposal should not be read as describing any program at the university where I am currently employed. I am proposing a workshop/ module scenario that could be adapted to any teacher education program, as it unburdens the program faculty on the whole, who are mandated to attend to licensing and accreditation requirements such as the IL Professional Teaching Standards, requests from the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), and new candidate assessment requirements such as the edTPA. Nevertheless, teacher education program faculty should develop a model that works for their program goals and suits the needs of their students and faculty.

*Notes*

1. Too numerous to list, but see the following: Garrison Institute Contemplative Teaching & Learning Research Database:<http://www.garrisoninstitute.org/contemplation-and-education/>; Mindfulness in Education Research Highlights:<http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/mindfulness_in_education_research_highlights>; and Kripalu Institute for Extraordinary Living Research Highlights: <http://www.kripalu.org/article/1456/>

2. Language is significant is making this initiative welcoming or unwelcoming to students. We should think carefully about what to call this and how to talk about it. This proposal is in keeping with the ASCD’s call to educate the whole child, which acknowledges the spiritual (as distinct from religious) nature of human beings, including students. The content of all of the MBTT workshops is in keeping with the democratic principles of public schools; it is secular yet welcoming to students who express a religious belief. We do not use terms such as spiritual or religious in these workshops. They are based in responsible, empirical research (including overwhelmingly positive self-report and observational data) and reflect the latest findings of neuroscience.

3. I have aligned the Yoga in Schools’ curriculum with PA standards, for example.

4. Initial teaching certification program students.

5. To address **IL SEL standards**, and to support health and physical education standards, universal design for learning, classroom management, school safety/anti-bullying programs, wellness/anti-obesity initiatives.

6. If we claim that these workshops will address **IPTS** **SEL Standards** and must evaluate our efforts to this purpose.

7. And IPTS Standard 1. Diverse Students, Knowledge Indicator C; Standard 4: Learning Environment.

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APPENDIX

Table 1.

*MBTT Aligned with IL Physical Development and Health (PDH) Standards and Social-Emotional Learning (SEL) Standards. Tools Modified from the Yoga in Schools’ Health and Physical Education Teacher Professional Development Curriculum ©2013 Yoga in Schools*

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| **Tools** | **PDH Goals** | **PDH Sub goals** | **SEL** | **SEL Sub goals** |
| **Body Postures**  Mountain  Warrior  Ragdoll/Forward Fold  Balancing/Tree/Half-Moon  Inversions  Plank/Incline/Table  Camel/Bow  Twist  Boat | **19. Acquire movement skills and understand concepts needed to engage in health-enhancing physical activity.** | A. Demonstrate physical competency in individual and team sports, creative movement, and leisure and work-related activities. |  |  |
| **Games & Activities**  Yogi Says  Turn on a Dime  Yogi Bowlers  Critical Friends  Elevator | **21: Develop team-building skills by working with others through physical activity.** | A. Demonstrate individual responsibility during group physical activities.  B. Demonstrate cooperative skills during structured group physical activity. | Goal 2 - Use social-awareness and interpersonal skills to establish and maintain positive relationships. | 2. A:  Recognize the feelings and perspectives of others. |
| **Breathing Exercises**  Snake  Bear  Bunny  Bee  Bellow  Feeling  Elephant  Balloon  Candle  **Relaxation Exercises**  Progressive Relaxation  Focused Meditation  Guided Meditation  Affirmations  **Philosophy**  Breath-Body-Mind Connection  Be Present (mindfulness)  Be Kind to Yourself/ Work at your edge/ Always listen to your body  Balance (effort and rest)  Be Curious and Humble/ We always have more to learn about ourselves and others  We are all unique beings, deserving of respect  What we give attention to, expands  Let go of judgments and expectations  Practice Compassion | **20: Achieve and maintain a health-enhancing level of physical fitness based upon continual self-assessment.**  **24: Promote and enhance health and well-being through the use of effective communication and decision-making skills.** | 20. B. Assess individual fitness levels. C. Set goals based on fitness data and develop, implement and monitor an individual fitness improvement plan.  24. A. Demonstrate procedures for communicating in positive ways, resolving differences and preventing conflict. | Goal 1: Develop self-awareness and self-management skills to achieve school and life success.  Goal 3 - Demonstrate decision-making skills and responsible behaviors in personal, school, and community contexts. | A: Identify and manage one’s emotions and behavior  2. Demonstrate an ability to prevent, manage, and resolve interpersonal conflicts in constructive ways. 3. Consider ethical, safety, and societal factors in making decisions.  4. Apply decision-making skills to deal responsibly with daily academic and social situations. 5. Contribute to the well-being of one’s school and community. |

Table 2.

Program Assessment Model

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|  | **Content** | **Delivery** | **Results** |
| **Internal Evaluation** | Instructor will provide a written justification of how the workshop’s goals and learning objectives align with the most current literature in the field of mindfulness. | Instructor will provide her own reflection on the workshops, how well her instruction was delivered, and the learning environment that was created. |  |
| **External Evaluation** | An expert in the field of mindfulness education, not affiliated with WIU, will review the goals, learning objectives, and planned content for their alignment with the most current literature in the field. | An expert in instructional design, preferably one with knowledge of mindfulness education, will observe the workshops to evaluate the instructional quality and how well the delivery met the educational goals. |  |
| **Student Evaluation** | Students will complete a post-workshop questionnaire, providing their opinions on the completeness of the content and its usefulness. | Students will complete a post-workshop questionnaire, providing their opinions of the instructional quality and its effectiveness in reaching the stated goals and objectives. | Graduates will be contacted in the future regarding their use of mindfulness tools in their classrooms or in their own lives. |

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