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A Guidebook to Integrating Mindfulness into the Secondary English Language Arts Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Recent trends indicate that adolescents are experiencing increased emotional dysfunction abetted by a variety of current events. The American public education system, and more specifically the secondary English language arts classroom, provides an opportunity to support students in developing emotional awareness and regulation through the practices of mindfulness. Mindfulness is the active development of nonjudgmental awareness of emotions. The concepts and practices on mindfulness can be integrated into the secondary ELA physical classroom and instructional practices, so as to support students' emotional well-being in conjunction with the traditional academic content. When implementing mindfulness concepts and practices into the classroom, educators should ensure the practices are equitable and accessible to all students. Educators may experience pushback from various stakeholders in education and should also be prepared to navigate that opposition with confidence and respect.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

My Story and Inspiration

We sat in the cramped conference room with no air conditioning in creaky chairs around a wooden table. These meetings always left me with emotive dissonance –an amalgamation of emotions, dominated by pride and distress.

The pride came from the fact that I was having this meeting at all. It was my annual gifted individualized education plan (GIEP) meeting with my classroom teachers and parents, led by the principal and special education coordinator. The adults discussed my strengths—anything academic—and then my “goals for enrichment.” These goals were often vague and undefined—more so used to check off boxes on a form than for anything relating to self-improvement, academically, socially, or affectively.

At some point towards the end of the meeting my mother, who understood me holistically, would interject what she believed I needed to work on for my well-being as a human instead of a student: expressing and coping with my emotions. I am, and always have been, an extremely intellectual, rather than emotional, person. In other words, I have a lot of “head knowledge” that doesn’t quite transfer to “heart knowledge”. This was semi-sustainable as a child, as my surroundings, relationships, and self-image were relatively stable and straightforward, resulting in few major emotional crises. I did well in school and was well-behaved – the two most highly desired actions in educational institutions, historically, so adults enabled this detachment from my emotions. When I did experience a negative emotion, I would suppress it so that I could fulfill the image I had projected of myself to others over the years: a perfectly happy and well-rounded child and teenager. My mother, an emotionally intelligent

woman, saw through this façade and recognized my illusion of perfection that deceived everyone else. She also saw the goals included in my GIEP as the perfect place to address this.

The administrators at these meetings never considered my mom's ideas for goals related to developing my emotional intelligence, and I, not wanting to admit to a deficiency in the perfect façade I had created, was content with that. Solely relying on my intellect had brought me to this point; What need was there to disrupt that?

Eventually, however, I did reach a point at which I could not be solely dependent on my intellect. I found myself with increasingly complicated surroundings, relationships, and especially images of myself. Ignoring the *real human emotions* that I was experiencing was no longer an option, but I did not know what other options existed, as I had been allowed—and allowed myself—to avoid emotions during adolescence. During my senior year of high school, I found myself deeply depressed with no idea of how to cope with it, or even mention it to someone who did. This deeply impacted my academics—what I was always praised for—as I went from being slated as valedictorian to almost not graduating high school, which is when the adults in my life took notice that I was struggling. Ultimately, I did receive the support I needed, and although I still struggle with major depressive disorder today, I now have the tools and skills necessary to navigate my mood disorder.

I neither could nor would fault anyone—not my parents, those who educated me, my friends—for the emotional crisis I experienced. However, I do wonder what may have been different had my mother's idea of goals pertaining to emotional intelligence been realized in my GIEP. Could something have been implemented into my education to develop my comfort with expressing emotions? Most likely. Would it have helped me to avoid the mental health crisis that ultimately occurred? Possibly. Would it have benefitted my academic journey? Absolutely!

With this experience fresh in my mind during my studies at the Penn State College of Education, I became curious about possible supports within the educational system to help other students with similar emotional difficulties. I was introduced to the science and practice of mindfulness by my professors, and I

immediately recognized the benefits of the practice for myself and other students. I also realized the potential within the English Language Arts classroom to close the gap within schools between students' current emotional needs and the current initiatives provided to students for coping with those needs. From there, I researched how mindfulness practices could be seamlessly integrated into the secondary ELA classroom to promote the well-being and emotional intelligence of our students, and with that, I present this guidebook.

Exigence

Although some elements of my story are unique, the root problem of increased stress, depression, and emotional dysfunction is not, especially in adolescents and young adults. In recent years, there has been a considerable uptick in mental health-related diagnoses in adolescents and teens (Manutscheri, 2021), a majority of which are Major Depressive Disorder (MDD), General Anxiety Disorder (GAD), and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) (National Alliance on Mental Illness, n.d.). With adolescence comes an increased risk for the development of mental disorders, due to the great changes in social, affective, and cognitive dispositions (Manutscheri, 2021). However, the statistics seen today, linked to a variety of causes beyond simply being in adolescence, are exceptionally concerning: From 2007 to 2019, there was a 60 percent increase in adolescent and young adult major depressive disorders and suicides (Mental and Behavioral Health NSCH, 2020).

The growing popularity of social media has had an immense effect on the function of our brains. This was most notably expressed to the public through the Netflix documentary *The Social Dilemma*, which compiles interviews with experts in tech, medicine, politics, and science to reveal the negative effects social media brought into many aspects of our lives. Adolescents and young adults have only known a world with these platforms and constant connectivity, as opposed to their Generation X parents and Baby Boomer grandparents, so the world is just starting to see the long-term effects of extensive

social media on our brains. Some of these effects include increased feelings of depression and anxiety, shortened attention spans, and addictive tendencies (Orlowski, 2020). When the negative effects of media are coupled with the romanization and/or stigmatization of mental illness, the problem only worsens, the popular novel-based television drama *13 Reasons Why* and its aftermath being an epitome of this (Manutsheri, 2021).

The recent COVID-19 pandemic further exasperated the influx of symptoms and diagnoses as students suddenly found themselves physically and socially isolated with a general sense of uncertainty for their future. For underprivileged adolescents, who also experienced financial stress, unsafe housing, abusive families, and/or food insecurity, the pandemic was even more harmful to their mental health. The pandemic's effects on student mental health are clearly apparent to teachers, parents, and administrators, as more students are granted Section 504 accommodations and IEPs (legal documents that outline specific academic, social, and physical accommodations to which a student is entitled in order to provide an equitable education), which while helpful and necessary to students, create a greater workload on school personnel.

Thankfully, in conjunction with the increased prevalence of mental health-related diagnoses, honest discussions about mental well-being, and more specifically, being proactive in maintaining it, have become more prevalent. The stigma around topics such as psychiatric medications, talk therapy, symptoms of depression and anxiety, and trauma has seemingly lessened, especially among younger generations, who are more willing to disclose information about their mental well-being to friends and seek help from medical professionals. This appears to be the silver lining amidst the rising number of diagnoses, but just because the stigma around mental illness is lessening does not mean all those who need treatment or support and receiving it, especially underprivileged populations.

There is a clear need for an initiative to help combat the increased mental illness in adolescents and teens, and our public school system is one place to introduce such an initiative, as almost every student can be reached by a public school. However, large federal or state initiatives take time to develop,

and even school-wide initiatives face some opposition for a host of reasons. Despite these barriers though, there are ways to support students in individual classrooms with the skills and tools they need to experience less stress and depression.

Enter mindfulness. Mindfulness-based stress reduction, a cognitive-behavioral therapy developed by Jon Kabat-Zin is an accessible and effective technique that has been proven to lower feelings of anxiety and depression. While it is officially considered a medical/psychological treatment, its practices can be easily translated into a classroom environment to help the growing population of students struggling with mental health conditions and emotional awareness and regulation. The secondary English language arts classroom lends itself especially well to the implantation of mindfulness-based practices because of its relational nature, instructional methods, and content material. This guide explores multiple methods to seamlessly implement mindfulness practices into the secondary ELA classroom as a complement and component of one's teaching philosophy to educate and nurture the whole student from within the classroom.

Background

Before implementing mindfulness practices in the classroom, one must first understand what mindfulness is. "Mindfulness" has become a buzzword in today's media, but behind that, there is evidence-based research and specific theory and practice that uphold mindfulness' credibility, effectiveness, and value, and justify its use in medical and educational settings.

Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn, a professor of medicine at the University of Massachusetts Medical developed Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) in 1979 after recognizing the value of eastern meditative practices, especially those of Buddhist monks, for patients dealing with conditions such as psoriasis, as well as chronic pain and stress (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Knowing the hesitation some Western patients would have towards a treatment based on Eastern religion, Kabat-Zinn consulted a Rinzaï Zen

Master, Soko Morinaga Roshi, for guidance (Kabat-Zinn, 2003). Roshi advised Kabat-Zinn to “Throw out Buddha, throw out Zen” and focus on the underlying principle of meditation—awareness—in order to make the developing treatment palatable to a Western audience (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 73). Kabat-Zinn then applied behavioral intervention strategies (a Western theory) to the concept of awareness to create something truly universal, neither exclusively Eastern nor Western, religious or secular (Kabat-Zinn, 2015). Rather mindfulness in theory and practice is simply human (Kabat-Zinn, 2015).

“Mindfulness can be thought of as moment-to-moment, non-judgmental awareness...” states Dr. Kabat Zin (Kabat-Zinn, 2015, p. 1481). Whether arrived at intentionally (“*deliberate mindfulness*”) or spontaneously (“*effortless mindfulness*”), it is simply a “know[ing] what is actually happening as it is happening,” (Kabat-Zinn, 2015, p. 1481). It is important to note that mindfulness is not an effort to “clear one’s mind”; it is rather the opposite—to be fully aware of one’s thoughts, actions, and environment in the present moment. The future and past are not considered; only what is in the present moment both sensually and cognitively is of consequence.

Furthermore, because mindfulness is non-judgmental, the thoughts that cross one’s mind during a moment of mindfulness are not scrutinized or evaluated for their value. They are simply acknowledged with a neutral appreciation for the present moment. Judgment results in shame and intimidation, two feelings that discourage individuals from engaging in self-improvement. In its most simple form, mindfulness is a non-threatening, accessible, and simple mode to enhance well-being.

Personal Practice & Implementation

Like all practices and ideas that you implement in your classroom, it is important to fully understand mindfulness yourself before introducing it to students. Thankfully, a personal mindfulness practice is easy to start as an individual and teacher. In fact, "When educators move beyond

understanding mindfulness to 'embodying' it, their students experience even greater positive effects from their own mindfulness practice (Schussler et al. 2022). This could be due to several reasons:

- Teachers have a greater understanding of the experience of their students during mindfulness practices and can better relate to and guide them (Schussler et al. 2022).
- Students have better relationships with their teachers, as their teachers have exhibited the positive effects of mindfulness in their own lives (Schussler et al. 2022).
- Students are more likely to believe and place stake in a practice they see their teacher implementing in their own life. Practicing what you preach really can be the key to getting student buy-in (Schussler et al. 2022).
- Mindfulness will become a regular part of students' classroom experience, as teachers will begin to exhibit mindfulness practices more effortlessly and possibly subconsciously during instruction, serving as a continuous model for students (Schussler et al. 2022).

In addition to pursuing a personal mindfulness journey, a teacher looking to introduce mindfulness practices into their classroom must be willing to adjust their instructional practices accordingly, as well as attend ongoing professional development on the topic, as new research develops (Schussler et al. 2022).

Whether you are a beginner to mindfulness or a long-time practitioner looking for new ways to incorporate it into your classroom, this guide will provide you with insights on creating a mindful classroom community and instructional practices, as well as special considerations for certain populations of students and information on how to navigate any obstacles you may encounter.

Though the guide is separated into sections, the practices are meant to work in conjunction with each other. For example, practices mentioned under "Minilessons" can be used in a canonical text study and writing studies. Mix and match; adapt and configure to your comfort and students' needs. I recommend choosing one or two practices to implement and adding more when these first few become stable routines in your classroom, so as to not overwhelm yourself or your students.

Note: Please be aware that these practices are not intended to replace medical or therapeutic treatment by a trained professional. Additionally, please keep in mind that all our students come from a variety of backgrounds and experiences, of which we know a fraction. Always inform students that they may abstain from any practices they feel are triggering at any point by removing themselves from the space, sitting quietly, or any other appropriate accommodation. These practices are intended to benefit student well-being, not harm it.

Chapter 2

Classroom Community

When a student first walks into a classroom, they will immediately notice the energy of the space, just as you or I do when entering an office, coffee shop, or concert. The energy of a space is influenced by the physical space itself, the activity happening within the space, and the routines established for the space. These elements have a huge impact on your students' classroom experience and can be harnessed to promote mindfulness and emotional well-being for your students. When undertaking this process, it is important to remember your own mindfulness practice first, and then apply and adapt that thinking to the thoughts, feelings, and needs of your students.

The Physical Space

Classroom Design

When designing the physical space of your classroom, you should first focus your attention on how different physical spaces affect you, as your state of well-being directly affects that of your students. Do certain colors create energy or weariness? Do bright lights help or hinder productivity and well-being? Do noises distract or focus? Do certain types of décor create greater feelings of ease or productivity than others? Are there any items you must have with you to feel at ease? Under what conditions can you not function? Being mindful of how certain design elements affect your energy, mind, and well-being is one of the first steps toward academic, social, and mental success for you and your students. Consider making a table similar to the one below to brainstorm your thoughts and compile these considerations to imagine your ideal space for your mental well-being.

	Colors	Lighting	Noise	Decor	Comfort Items/Supplies	Materials	Cleanliness/ Tidiness	Other
Beneficial								
Detrimental								

Table 1. Classroom Design Brainstorming

Then, stand in your classroom and become aware of your cognitive and physical reactions to the space. Do not judge however you may find yourself experiencing the space; remember, mindfulness is a nonjudgmental awareness. Also, do not judge yourself for any perceived shortcomings in the physical space of your classroom. You are now taking the steps to address them; take pride in that. Additionally, keep in mind the financial and safety, among other, constraints you face when designing the physical space of your classroom.

Compare the ideal space for your well-being you imagined in the first exercise to what you experienced in your classroom. What matches? What is missing? How could you take steps towards bringing greater alignment to the two spaces within your constraints in order to bring your best self to your classroom?

Now that you have brought your classroom space into harmony with your ideal space for your well-being (to the furthest extent possible), do an exercise in design similar to this with your students; the space affects them as well. Ask what allows them to be present in the classroom. What makes them feel safe? Alert? Energized? Calm? Consider this input from your students as well when making design choices.

You can also encourage them to be mindful of all the spaces they inhabit daily. Are they fully present in those spaces? How do those spaces affect their well-being? How can they change those spaces to better help their sense of calm?

In addition to the overall classroom design, there are other physical aspects of the classroom set-up you may want to consider adding to promote mindfulness and emotional well-being.

Designated Mindfulness Spaces

The purpose of this guide is to integrate mindfulness into all aspects (physical space, culture, and instruction) of the secondary ELA classroom. However, it may be wise to have a designated space for only mindfulness activities. This does not mean that mindfulness can only be practiced in this space; rather, it means that only mindfulness is practiced in this space—nothing else. Similarly to how we designate time to the things that are most important to us (as will be discussed in the “Instructional Practices” section), we should also designate space to the things that are most important to us. If we want our students to recognize mindfulness as a valuable tool in their learning and personal lives, we should reflect its value in as many ways as possible, including the space it is allotted in the classroom.

A designated mindfulness space can be designed however you need it to be—according to student needs, classroom size, and financial constraints. Maybe the only space in your classroom able to be designated for mindfulness is a bookshelf. Maybe you have an empty corner that needs a purpose. Both spaces, and all the spaces in between, are perfect for designating your mindfulness space. However, no matter what the space, you should keep in mind the following:

- **Clear identification as a mindfulness space:** This may be in the form of a simple sign, clearly differentiated aesthetic, position in the room, or an expectation you share with students at the beginning of the school year (and remind them of as the year progresses). Whichever way, it is necessary to clearly define the space, and maintain that special designation in order to reflect the value and focused nature of the space.
- **Student accessibility:** As students develop their own mindfulness practice, they will become more aware of when they may need to make use of the designated mindfulness space—and that may not line up with your schedule. Therefore, you will want to make this space one that is easy for students to access without your assistance (when appropriate), in case you are engaged in other work when they need the space or supplies.

- Awareness of the space: If students do not know the space exists, what the space is for, or when they may take advantage of the space, it will be insignificant to your goal of integrating mindfulness into the physical space, culture, and instruction of your classroom. Ensure students are aware the space exists, that they may use it (and appropriate times to do so), and that it may only be used for mindfulness. Equally important, discuss the importance of recognizing when their peers are making use of the space and why they may be doing so. Flexible or novel spaces may be initially seen as spaces to socialize, and mindfulness can be social, but it is not always. Explain the importance of allowing someone time and space in order to regain or maintain their physical and emotional well-being.
- Clear expectations: Again, because novel spaces in a classroom could initially be misused because of their novelty, it is imperative to communicate the expectations for your mindfulness space. These expectations should be included when you create the syllabus with students (explained in the “Crucial Conversations” section) in order to give students a sense of agency in the space. If you are unable to include students in the creation of your syllabus, still discuss these expectations with them in a transparent manner and allow for questions and suggestions for the space.
- You too can use this space: You are a member of this classroom community—you can and should take advantage of all the resources it provides! Take a moment to regroup in the mindfulness space if needed—this will model to students how and when it should be used and that you “practice what you preach”. Additionally, if students see you making use of the mindfulness space, and they understand that when someone uses the mindfulness space that they may be overwhelmed or experiencing a negative emotion, it can signal to the students that a classroom expectation is possibly not being met.

The size and space you have for your mindfulness area will determine what supplies you add to it for your students to use in their mindfulness practices. The following chart displays a variety of supplies you may include when creating your mindfulness space:

General Supplies	Pencils, Paper (lined and unlined), Colored Markers/Pens/Pencils, Coloring Books
Basic Needs	Small snacks, Water, Hygiene items
Technology	Headphones, Access to Meditation Services (Headspace, etc.), White Noise Machine
Furniture	Stools, Beanbag Chairs, Rocking Chairs, Lap Desks, Floor Mats,
Literature	Inspirational Texts, Mindfulness Guidebooks
Comfort Items	Weighted blanket, Fidget toys

Table 2. Materials for Designated Mindfulness Space

Consult the “Obstacles and Oppositions” section for ideas for acquiring funding for these items.

Word Walls

Commonly used in elementary and English Language Learner classrooms, word walls can also be useful in promoting mindfulness. How often do you ask a student, “How are you?” or, “What’s wrong?” and they answer with, “I don’t know?” It is possible that this student does not have the vocabulary to describe the feeling they are experiencing at that moment. Expanding students’ vocabulary, especially about emotionally charged words, can close this knowledge gap and provide students the scaffolding they need to be able to accurately describe their feelings in the present moment. When creating your word wall, remember the following:

- Match the sophistication of vocabulary to your students' needs—Students in an AP level course may make use of different words than an on-level student might, as the work they are completing will require a different vocabulary.
- Are there words in required class readings that can double as general vocabulary and emotional vocabulary? Could you adjust your class readings to include more emotional vocabulary? It's always good to “feed two birds with one seed,” (Dr. Knotts).
- What visible wall space do you have in your classroom to make a word wall? Would a “personal emotional dictionary” work better for your students so that they can have them outside of the classroom?
- What materials do you have to make your word wall?
- How will you keep up with additions to the word wall? Make sure the set-up is manageable and something that can easily fit into your classroom routines.

Mindfulness Anchor Charts

Again, anchor charts are common in elementary settings for teaching and reminding students of foundational skills. However, this same method can be used in conjunction with your minilessons on mindfulness. Bright and colorful, yet simple and easy-to-read anchor charts hung around the room can serve as a simple reminder and guide for students' mindfulness. Include students in creating the anchor chart to ensure their understanding of its content and when the content would apply to their lives. Then, hang it somewhere easily visible (possibly in your mindfulness space) and advise students to consult it information on it whenever they become aware of a need for it. Easily visible anchor charts containing mindfulness concepts and/or practices allow students to access this information from their space in the classroom if it is not an appropriate time to access the entire mindfulness space. It also allows students to

see how these practices can be utilized discreetly from their desks, should they ever encounter a situation where they need to do so.

Crucial Conversations

Foundational Expectations and Attitudes

When establishing classroom norms and expectations, it is important to include conversations about mindfulness immediately from the beginning of the year if it is to be a priority in your classroom. These conversations should be low-stakes, informal, and dialogic, and cover the basic principles and importance of mindfulness. Beginning the year with mindfulness as a topic and expectations will help students to associate it into their schema of your classroom, making it seem less “intrusive”. Be aware that students may have some apprehensions about the topic/practices, so consider the demographics and beliefs of your area when deciding how to approach it. (You can read more about this in the “Obstacles and Oppositions” section.)

Some additional topics and essential questions related to mindfulness, social-emotional learning, and emotional intelligence you should consider including in these initial conversations about classroom norms and expectations are as follows:

- Confidentiality: What is confidentiality? Why is it important? Under what circumstances could confidentiality be broken?
- Honesty: What is honesty? What is considered not being honest? Why does honesty matter in our space? How can we address an instance of dishonesty?
- Empathy: What is empathy? What does empathy (not) look like? How do we practice empathy?
- Self-awareness: What does it mean to be “aware of oneself?” How can we develop an awareness of ourselves? What do we do when in our awareness of self, we become aware of a problem?

- Self-regulation: What does it look and feel like to self-regulate? How does it relate to being aware of ourselves?
- Mutual trust: What does *mutual* trust look like? How do we foster it? How could mutual trust be broken? What do we do if our mutual trust is broken?

Many other words and concepts that are specific to mindfulness and its practices are important to define and discuss with students. Those listed above are important to the general expectations and culture of your classroom; more specific terms and topics can be covered as appropriate in minilessons, textual studies, and writing instruction.

These conversations should not be isolated at the beginning of the school year and then forgotten. As these topics are essential to creating a space that is safe and fosters mindfulness, they should be revisited often and as needed throughout the school year, as your students and classroom community grow.

Guest Speakers

The initial introduction of mindfulness, as well as the essential expectations and general culture of your classroom, is a great time to invite a guest speaker to your classroom. If you have anyone in your area with certifications in mindfulness, they would be a fantastic (an obvious) choice. Mental health professionals, counselors, social workers, or meditation and yoga instructors can also provide insight from another perspective and help with student buy-in by adding validation to the concepts and practices. Ask guest speakers to continue the discussion you have already begun, lead students in an extended mindfulness activity, or do anything else that would positively contribute to the integration of mindfulness into your classroom. Additionally, students always find it exciting to have a guest in the class, so this can also serve to “feed two birds with one seed” (as Dr. Michelle Knotts says) by having a mindful guest speaker that adds variety to your instruction and everyday schedule.

Student-Driven Syllabus

Mindfully creating the syllabus for your class is another way to proactively reduce student stress levels and improve their emotional awareness right away at the beginning of the year.

If you have been teaching your course for a few years, you may already have a syllabus created, and as the saying goes, “If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!” You already have a lot on your plate, so instead of beginning from scratch, adjust the way you approach the syllabus with students and allow for student feedback that leads to class section-individualized changes.

One way to mindfully approach a completed syllabus that centers student engagement is to ask students to highlight any parts of the syllabus that evoke some sort of emotion—whether it be positive or negative. Perhaps use one color of highlighter to mark sections of the syllabus that bring on a sense of tension, stress, anxiety, etc., and another color for sections that elicit excitement, joy, peace, etc. as you review the syllabus during class. You can also have students take notes in the margins to elaborate on what emotions or physical reactions they experienced. Then, as a class, go over the areas that students marked. Discuss how they felt (if comfortable sharing) and why they felt that way. Adjust where you can help with negative reactions (added workdays, shifted grading scales, etc.) The goal is not to lower expectations or to make your course “easier,” but to call attention to and validate how students initially react to the work ahead of them and put in place any supports that will bring them success.

If you do not have a completed syllabus, or you want to try something different than what you have in the past, consider involving your classes in the creation of the syllabus. Outline areas you will need to include, such as the schedule, classroom expectations, assignments, grading, units, etc. Then, one by one, discuss these sections with your students. Start by asking what their expectations are for you as their teacher, their peers, and the class as a whole. There will likely be some differences in the expectations of your students, so be prepared to work through disagreements. Acknowledge how certain ideas and expectations raise certain emotional or physical responses, and that all these responses are valid, and then work as a class to reach a compromise. The syllabus still must align with your course outline and

curriculum expectations; you are, of course, the trained professional who will be accountable for your class. You can, and should make executive decisions or initially provide “non-negotiables”, but including students in the creation of other sections in your syllabus allows your students a sense of agency in your class and have worked through/made you aware of any major anxieties that may arise later in the year so you can proactively help students when those assignments, topics, units, etc. come up later in the year.

Classroom Routines

The final major aspect of developing your classroom community is the establishment of routines that reflect mindfulness concepts and practices, and that students are confident in executing.

Flexible Seating and Movement

Flexible seating is the opportunity for students to choose from a variety of furniture set-ups from which to complete their work. This can be as simple as allowing students to choose their seats, or as diverse as providing multiple areas of seating including desks, collaborative tables, carpets, more comfortable chairs, etc. At the beginning of the year, expectations for these spaces and the routine of using them should be clearly communicated: how the spaces are to be used, when students can access them, how students should go about accessing them, etc. This practice further develops mindfulness practices because, as students grow more aware of their feelings and needs, they can adjust their environment to provide the best sense of well-being for completing coursework or other classroom activities. Your designated mindfulness area could also double as a part of the flexible seating routine as a way to maximize the versatility and value of your space.

Depending on how you implement flexible seating routines, student movement within the classroom will shortly follow. Again, expectations for student movement should be clearly defined and

adjusted as needed throughout the year and for individual students (possibly per Section 504 plans or IEPs). Student movement in the classroom does not just refer to changing their seating environment; another way to allow students to express their mindfulness is by allowing and planning for movement as a part of your lesson. For example, instead of having students say which option of two they would pick, ask them to go to one side of the room for one option, and the other side of the room for the remaining option. Our body's movements help to keep our minds engaged, and we need engaged minds to be non-judgmentally aware of our experiences and feelings, as well as to process incoming academic content. When students need to move during a portion of the class period that you have planned for them to not do so, consider allowing movement as long as it is not disruptive and has the intention to increase student learning and achievement. If movement is not appropriate at the time it is needed, consider allowing the student to utilize a fidget toy from the mindfulness area in your room, which allows that student movement without disrupting other students' learning. Other options in this situation include sensory seating furniture at the student's desk and tactile seat cushions.

Because the movement of students can disrupt other students, these practices should be implemented with clear expectations, boundaries, and the success of all students in mind.

Grading and Due Dates

Grading and assignment due dates are major sources of stress and anxiety for students. Remaining competitive for post-secondary education and scholarship awards contribute greatly to the obsession students have surrounding their numerical grades and stretching their schedules as tight as possible to participate in the most extracurricular activities in pursuit of being the perfectly well-rounded student. Causing a systemic paradigm shift away from a focus on grades and towards student learning in education will not occur quickly; however, we can help students navigate this meritocratic system by providing the tools and flexibility they need to do so.

The initial conversations surrounding grading and assignment due dates should occur when creating/reflecting on the syllabus. During the discussion about the syllabus, be transparent about your grading system and ask students about their concerns. This is not to lower the standards you use to determine grades, but instead to address concerns proactively so students will be successful in meeting those standards. Again, ask students to dial into their reactions when talking about grading and due dates. What thoughts do they have? How does their body react? Then, work alongside students to make appropriate adjustments or provide tools to help students view grades and due dates differently. This could look like breaking a large assignment into chunks or emphasizing their learning holds greater importance than their numerical grade. You may also remind them of the mindfulness practices you have learned to bring a sense of calm when they experience distress about a grade or due date that is insignificant from a wider perspective.

As the year progresses, life will happen, and students will inevitably ask for extensions on assignments. At the beginning of the year, inform students that you will always consider extensions, but that they should ask for one the instant they sense an overwhelming stress/physical reaction/etc. about an assignment, rather than wait until the night an assignment is due. Then, in addition to mastering the academic content of the assignment, students also learn self-awareness and advocacy (skills equally important to academic content) by applying mindfulness practices to their interactions with assignments. Together, this support results in great student success, academically and personally.

Chapter 3

Instructional Practices

Beginning Class

Most who choose to integrate mindfulness practices into their classrooms find that opening class with a mindful bellringer activity is accessible and accepted. This is good practice for many reasons:

1. Students coming from the hallway need a moment to recenter themselves. I remind students to “leave the hallway in the hallway”, no matter what just happened, and to focus on the present moment at their desks to prepare themselves for the coming lesson. At the secondary level, students are especially navigating much more than what we see in the classroom, so taking a moment to recognize that can help to promote comfortability and focus during the lesson. We are not looking for students to “clear their minds” (which is near impossible), but instead to acknowledge their thoughts and feelings without judgment. Developing this space of neutrality creates a foundation and space for the coming academic content.
 2. You, the teacher, need a quick break/reset between classes. Maybe the previous class period was challenging, or you must totally switch gears from one class period to the next—practicing mindfulness at the beginning of your next class allows for a refreshed mindset going into the current class period.
 3. Placing a mindfulness practice at the beginning of a class period does not interrupt the flow of your academic lesson. The order and pacing of a well-crafted lesson are important for student success, so this allows your mindfulness practices to not interfere with that.
- Additionally, the transitions between your mindfulness-based bellringer and your academic lesson will seem organic: “Now that we are focused and refreshed, let’s get into today’s focus...”

4. Placing mindfulness at the beginning of the lesson communicates its importance to students.

When checking items off our to-do list, we mostly check the high-priority items first—the same should apply to your lessons. Beginning the class period with mindfulness emphasizes to students that their mental well-being is important and even a prerequisite to their academic success.

Many different mindfulness practices are ideal for these “bellringer” type activities. No matter which you choose to incorporate, be sure that it draws students to have an awareness of the present moment without judgment. Some examples of mindfulness exercises that work well as bellringers include mindful breathing, breath prayers (Riley, 2023), laughter yoga, intention setting, body scans, progressive muscle relaxation, doodling, and free writes.

Minilessons

Drawing on the *Units of Study* Workshop curriculum published by Lucy Calkins*, minilessons offer a great framework for both teaching specific mindfulness topics and practices. Minilessons allow for quick, bite-sized lessons with clear expectations and immediate assessment. These 10–15-minute lessons have four basic components: Connection, Teaching Point, Active Engagement, and Link. Minilessons are traditionally scripted, which provides a plan of exactly what you will say during the lesson: a fantastic scaffold if you are still learning the mindfulness concepts and practices yourself. If you are more familiar with mindfulness concepts and practices, the scripting may not be as important and could be left out; however, the framework still serves as a great tool for teaching mindfulness concepts and practices.

An example of a minilesson using mindfulness practices could focus on centering yourself before starting a task using mindful breathing. This would be a great minilesson to use to introduce the bellringer practices above.

Minilessons based on mindfulness could also be integrated into a study of a canonical text, young adult literature, writing, or poetry. An example of a teaching point for a minilesson combining academic content and mindfulness concepts could involve using character feelings to develop students' emotional awareness, regulation, and vocabulary. The flexibility of the minilesson format allows them to be adapted to specific skills and goals from any curriculum, so you can leverage this format to reach mostly all students' academic and emotional goals.

After a traditional minilesson in a reading or writing workshop, students have a period of independent work time. When using a minilesson to teach mindfulness topics or practices, you can allow students to engage with the practice on their own, or transition into the remainder of your academic content for the day.

*Note of *Units of Study*: Recently, there has been much debate in the education field, and more specifically how to best teach students to read. Within this debate, the *Units of Study* workshop curriculum has come under examination and criticism for its supposed neglect of phonics instruction. New changes to the curriculum have addressed these concerns, but for the sake of this inquiry into the integration of mindfulness into the secondary ELA classroom, this debate is extraneous. Minilessons on mindfulness concepts and practices, as presented here, simply recognize the usefulness of the framework for its focused, time-efficient, and applicable nature, and should not be dismissed simply because of present concerns about its ability to teach students to read.

Textual Studies

Canonical Studies

Certain texts serve as a hallmark of the high school English classroom—*Romeo and Juliet*, *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *Frankenstein*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Of Mice and Men*... The list continues with novels and plays initially chosen for their literary merit and that remain traditions in many classrooms. These texts are often aged in comparison to students, but they endure for their archetypal themes, plots, and characters. Most students will sigh, grimace, and gripe when they look at their old hardback copy of a canonical text—causing teachers to look for innovative ways to bring the canon to life and prove its enduring relevancy within the classroom. Pairing mindfulness practices with these texts is one way to consider doing just that.

These texts endure in curriculums for many reasons—some justified, some oppressive—and mindfulness can be integrated into the instruction of them in direct response to these reasons.

The *mostly* universal themes, plots, and characters these texts contain contribute to their longevity. Examining these universal traits can provide a wonderful opportunity to study character emotions and reactions to events. You can guide students through examining characters' actions, then naming the emotions they may be experiencing, and finally discussing how practicing the concepts of mindfulness could allow the character to handle the situation.

I say these texts have *mostly* universal characteristics, as this is primarily only true for those in privileged positions in western society: the white heterosexual middle-upper class Christian cis men. Readers of other identities may be able to relate to some of the experiences and descriptions in these texts that universally unite us as humans; however, as the traditional cannon exists in classrooms today, the majority of authors and subjects center the experiences of people who have historically held and abused their power over others.

Therefore, educators working for greater equity and justice must find ways to continue to teach these texts as prescribed by governing bodies, while actively working to dismantle oppressive systems. There are a few ways in which you can go about this. Establishing these liberating instructional methods must be the first step to teaching texts in the traditional canon.

Gholdy Muhammad, author of *Cultivating Genius* (2020), among other liberating education practitioner materials, presents her solution to this issue: Historically Responsive Literacy Framework. This framework increases equity through culturally and historically responsive literary practices. This framework includes teaching a variety of diverse “layered” texts in order to portray an accurate depiction of the history and culture the literature exists in, as well as recognizing students’ intersectional identities as a step in the planning process. Furthermore, texts are taught with a focus on four domains that allow for equitable practices, diverse perspectives, and academic rigor. Identity, Skills, Intellect, and Criticality compose the four domains that instruction should be centered around. The inclusion of each of these domains creates well-rounded education. When choosing a classic text to teach, one should consider how the text addresses each of these domains, or how you can diversify your instruction to include each of these domains in your instruction by adding supporting texts, asking “tough” questions, and encouraging students to apply the experiences and concepts in the texts to their lives.

In my practice, we have been working through classic works of literature, as per the required curriculum (AP English Literature and Composition, and the Pennsylvania Common Core Standards). In my instruction of these texts, we have explored the inequities and social issues related to the texts, as well as the historical and cultural context and rather than simply completing literary analysis and comprehension checks. The goals of every unit are to articulate the thematic message of the texts, and diversifying the lens through which we study the texts allows students to ponder thematic messages that include the perspectives of historically marginalized identities, rather than just those of privilege.

For example, a recent text study was the play *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry (1959). Hansberry was the first African American female playwright to have a play premiere on Broadway, and

the addition of her work to the curriculum is amazing for expanding representation. We pushed beyond diverse representation in our instruction, however, by examining housing discrimination, intersectionality, and inequities that lie in the path of the American Dream for, specifically in this case, African Americans.

Once the instruction of the canon has been adjusted to be liberating and accessible, then mindfulness principles can be incorporated, as the themes, plots, and characters are relatable and applicable to a greater majority of students: those who have been historically privileged *and* underprivileged. For the integration of mindfulness, there are a few different pathways, with the first of these being similar to what I described at the beginning of this section: examining character emotions, reactions, and their methods of handling these experiences.

Another possibility is to have students do a self- or partner check-in at certain moments in the text to compare their own emotions and reactions to that of the characters and their peers. The Mindfulness exercises in the “Beginning Class” section can be used as a part of these check-ins; for example, body scans or quick writes during positively or negatively intense moments can help students to understand their bodies’ and brains’ responses to certain situations by vicariously experiencing them in literary characters. These first two methods of mindfulness incorporation work well within a character or plot structure study. A final idea is for students to keep a log of moments in the text in which they experience an affective, cognitive, or biological reaction to the text. This log would include textual evidence, a summary, and a description of their reaction to feelings.

All these methods can then lead to discussions on thematic messages. After seeing how various bodies and brains react to texts with universally relatable and applicable topics, students can then begin to articulate what this implies of the overall meaning of the text and humanity.

Young Adult Literature

Young adult literature (YAL) has become more prevalent in classrooms for its diversity of voices, authors, characters, and experiences, as well as its increased accessibility and propensity to various modes of instruction, i.e., book clubs, independent reading, and whole class studies. These advantages to YAL also allow for a more straightforward integration of mindfulness concepts and practices into its instruction.

Unlike studies of canonical texts, YAL instruction begins nearer to liberating practices because of its diversity of voices within and around the texts. The selection of texts to be taught and the way they are taught are still something to be cognizant of; however, there is a greater likely likelihood that a YAL text will be relatable and accessible to most of your students. While YAL tends to offer more, as Rudine Sims Bishop aptly refers to them, “windows and mirrors” for all students to gaze into the lives of others (windows) and see their experiences reflected back at them (mirrors) (Bishop, 1990), it is still important to choose texts carefully under the guides of equity, diverse representation, and historical accuracy. Again, Muhammad’s Historically Responsive Literacy Framework can guide your choice of text and the lens through which to teach it.

YAL texts easily lend themselves to independent reading and book clubs due to their high-interest subjects and relatability. Teachers are able to step back as students are more invested in their texts and therefore have a greater intrinsic motivation to read, contemplate, and discuss them. For independent reading, students can be more introspective as they will have no fear of anyone judging their thoughts, emotions, and reactions. In book clubs, students can see into the lives of their peers or receive validation of their feelings. When partnered with mindfulness concepts, both modes of delivery develop the students’ emotional awareness and regulation.

Writing Instruction

Writing instruction and the writing process is another self-evident area in which to integrate concepts of mindfulness. As the written expression of thoughts, the connection between writing and mindfulness is clear; in fact, writing the thoughts you have become aware of brings even more awareness to them by making the intangible tangible.

Writing to Think/Learn

Too often in school, there is little to no time for students to write about topics of their choosing. Essays have assigned prompts, research papers have assigned topics, and literary analyses have assigned texts. Students equate writing with being controlled, which unfortunately leads them to despise the act. Adding choice and autonomy in the area not only makes the act of writing more accessible to students but also lends itself well to mindfulness integration.

Writing to think or learn is a strategy similar to a quick write. Students may be given a vague prompt but are most often encouraged to simply write what they are thinking about a given topic or at a given moment. Because writing to think/learn is often a student's stream of consciousness, the thoughts may be jumbled at first, but making the intangible thoughts tangible on paper allows for the strands to begin to untangle and students to understand their thoughts more clearly, leading to greater emotional awareness. Reviewing writing to think/learn entries can also reveal patterns and show emotional growth. It is also a great way to brainstorm for a more formal writing assignment, as students will generate a large quantity of writing that will dig into deeper thoughts. Having this large quantity of writing also helps to alleviate the anxiety some students face when facing a blank page. Writing to learn/think can be integrated into the strategy, Mindfulness Journaling, or used on its own.

Mindfulness Journaling

In-class daily journals are an easy way to help students regularly bring awareness to their thoughts and emotions during the school day. While these journals can be used for writing about the academic content of your course, I would encourage you to designate them as mindful spaces, similar to the designated mindful space in your classroom. You could offer a prompt daily, or have a standing prompt throughout the year—“How are you feeling at this moment?” Having daily journal writing will increase the amount of writing students do, which improves overall writing and creates a mindful moment in the class period. Students could write in these journals at the beginning of class as a bellringer (possibly in conjunction with a mindfulness exercise mentioned in the “Beginning Class” section) or they could be used at the end of class as an exit slip of sorts. You could also have students access these journals whenever they become aware of a need to do so, again, much like the designated mindfulness space in your classroom. At the end of the year, these journals will serve as an artifact of their growth which they can reflect on. With student permission, you could also use these when attempting to gain funds or support for the mindfulness initiative at your school.

Poetry

Most writing, but especially poetry, is expressive, emotive, and thoughtful in nature, creating the ideal opportunity into which to implement mindfulness concepts and practices. When building awareness of the current moment, poetry allows the space to express that awareness.

Poetry can have a rigid or fluid structure, each of which has a purpose—and each of which can include elements of mindfulness. When students are initially putting their thoughts about the present onto paper via poetry, a free-verse poem (no rhyme scheme or meter) will be the most accessible. This form allows for total freedom of expression, no matter how messy, tangential, or jumbled, which is sometimes

the most accurate representation of thoughts and feelings. When we do not judge form, we are also less likely to judge content.

It is important to note that free-verse poetry, while written in verse, could look and sound very similar to creative prose. The delineation between prose and free verse poetry is murky at best and mainly comes down to the sectioning of words. Free verse poetry does make use of poetic devices, as could a creative free-write. Therefore, discourage students from focusing on the distinction between free verse and prose—this judgment will inhibit the expression of thought and emotion. Some students may find that thinking in verse allows a better expression of their thoughts while some may see the poetic structure as intimidating. Allow students to write in whichever (free verse poetry or prose) they find the most ease of expression. The focus of this practice is an act of mindfulness—the nonjudgmental expression of thoughts and emotions from the present moment.

After initially expressing thoughts and emotions in their most authentic free-flowing form, ask students to reflect on—not judge—what they created. During this step, students can explore different forms and play with poetic devices to match the content and structure of their work. Through this reflection, students can also gain a greater understanding of their cognitive and emotional processing. This can then be extended to reflections on how they view the world, cope with positive and negative life situations, and view their emotions, all of which build their emotional intelligence.

This revisional stage is also an opportunity to teach poetry standards that may be in your curriculum. Exposing students to different traditional forms of poetry (sonnets, odes, pastorals, limericks, elegies, ballads, sestinas...) creates a seamless integration of mindfulness into ELA instruction because you are able to teach the content you are required to through the exploration of mindfulness and their internal cognitive and emotive processes. And, who knows—you may discover a new up-and-coming writer of limericks, too!

If students are comfortable, these works could be shared with partners, small groups, or the class to engage in a conversation about the aspects of emotional intelligence. Taking this activity from an

individual- to a community-based activity can further build your classroom community (especially feelings of trust and respect), as well as enlarge students' cultural competency and empathy as they hear from peers who may process events, thoughts, and feelings differently from themselves. Students may also receive validation of their thoughts and emotions from hearing writing similar to theirs but written by their peers. Feeling validated in their thoughts and emotions will lead to confidence in expressing themselves, which will also make the nonjudgmental aspect of mindfulness more instinctual.

Finally, poetry is made to be heard, so share poetry aloud in your classroom! Sharing a work of their own aloud will be out of some students' comfort zones, so allow them to have an option of sharing a poem written by someone else or recording a video themselves instead of performing live. The performance aspect of poetry will not only emphasize the poetic techniques of the poem (covering academic content) but also allow for a greater connection between the reader and the emotion, as well as the reader and the audience. The reader feels a greater connection with the emotion of the poem because they can use body language, pacing, enunciation, volume, timbre, etc. to express the emotion with greater authenticity, as this helps to reflect the cognitive and physical nature of emotions. Spoken word poetry—poetry meant for performance and often surrounding social justice topics—can be a way to get students interested and excited about poetry, specifically its emotive performance, and emphasize the connections between poetry and mindfulness.

Discussion

Whole-class discussion is a fantastic instructional strategy in dialogic classrooms—classrooms in which student dialogue (debate, discussion, conversation, collaboration, etc.) is the center of instruction (Gorlewski, 2018); however, guiding students through participation in civil discourse can be difficult. Practicing mindfulness during discussions is one way to help students navigate possible tensions and disagreements. You do not want to end a discussion when it intensifies (unless it is causing harm to a

student), as these moments of tension can be where the best learning and revelations happen. Instead, encourage students to practice mindfulness when they feel themselves becoming emotional during a discussion, not as a way to intellectualize the emotion, but rather as a way to ensure the conversations remain respectful to all participants. When students are nonjudgmentally aware of their reactions or emotions during a discussion, they can take steps to better navigate them so they do not say or do anything they will regret in a moment of intense emotion.

This may look like interjecting during a class discussion to guide some deep breathing at either pre-determined times (beginning, middle, end) or as tensions rise. As students become more confident in their abilities to recognize their emotions and reactions, these deep breaths and resets will become self-regulated and allow for a more organic discussion.

This is also an instructional area in which the crucial conversations at the beginning of the year will affect the feelings of safety and comfort in the classroom. Students can find the discussion to be extremely stressful, as they are speaking in front of their peers, taking risks with new ideas, and potentially voicing an opinion or thought that is different from the rest of the group. Take note of students who express anxiety around discussions during conversations around the syllabus and provide supports for them leading up to and during the discussion. Also remind students of your expectations for the classroom community. You may want to even have a subset of expectations specifically for discussions—be open-minded, actively listen, remember each other's humanity, consider your tone, etc. Integrating mindfulness concepts and practices into the fabric of your class discussion will not eliminate anxieties and tensions, but rather allow students to work through them to experience more effective and satisfying discourse.

Homework

Homework presents an interesting debate in the educational world: Assigning additional practice can help solidify skills and concepts in students' minds, but sometimes, homework becomes a hindrance to academic and personal well-being when it lacks purpose and value. When assigning homework, be intentional about the assignments you choose. Beyond that, remind students that they have mindfulness practices they can use independently when completing homework if they find themselves becoming overwhelmed or frustrated. Encourage them to capitalize on these practices as a method of problem-solving, but if there are extreme circumstances, to come speak to you about the assignment for additional help or time (refer to classroom routines for due dates). Homework has benefits and being aware of diminishing returns and giving students proactive problem-solving skills can safeguard against homework impeding academic and personal well-being.

Chapter 4

Considerations for Marginalized Identities

Historical and Cultural Considerations

During the research and development of this guide, I have made my best effort to be aware of the privileges I have been afforded because of how I identify and to consider the marginalization many students experience because of their intersectional identities in the classroom. As a White, straight, middle-class Christian cis woman, I acknowledge that my experiences and socialization in the world at large, and more specifically in my education, are largely different from that of many students. My knowledge of the experiences of others is limited to what they have shared with me and what I have read. Therefore, I do not claim to know the experiences of all marginalized students and recognize I am writing this guide from a privileged perspective.

I encourage you, teacher, to also consider your identities, perspectives, experiences, and socialization when implementing any practice into your classroom, especially those based on mindfulness/emotional well-being. Many studies, curriculums, and “best practices” of mindfulness, emotional well-being, and social-emotional learning, while well-intentioned, further marginalize already underprivileged students by providing students with coping skills rather than encouraging disruptions to oppressive systems (Drake & Oglesby 2020), or they fail to recognize the differences of the experiences, beliefs, and traditions of students at all. These topics are deeply personal, so there must be an awareness of identity and lived experience when engaging in mindfulness practices on our own and with students. To best serve all students, especially those of marginalized identities, it is necessary to make space for the oppression they have experienced and allow students to confront it head-on, rather than allow injustices to continue by simply coping and enduring inequities, inequalities, and injustices (Drake & Oglesby 2020).

What was once referred to as “The Great Equalizer” is not quite so when critically examining its history and structure, as well as its current state. Education in America began as localized institutions and

remains so today. Before the official founding of the United States, children received their education in a variety of settings—home tutoring, church-sponsored schools, traveling educators, boarding schools, etc. However, these more formal institutions for education were only accessible to the privileged persons of the time—those who were free, did not need their children to work to support their family, were close enough to the physical school setting, spoke English, and were born biologically male. Children excluded from these groups did not receive formal education. Rather they learned their family's trade or were subjected to working in the home: both of which did not entitle them to power in society. Those experiencing slavery only knew the work they performed for those who enslaved them.

As the United States became more established and developed, public education became a popular concept; a democracy needs educated citizenship to function. Still, though, public schools were exclusionary to large populations of students, and in the case of enslaved peoples, namely African Americans subjected to the plantation economy and aftermath, receiving an education was illegal and could result in death. Even after explicitly exclusionary laws were overturned, these insidious practices continued with policies such as the Jim Crow laws, the "Separate but Equal" standard, and redlining. These populations were therefore excluded from the development of the American public education system, which still affects these students today. Their cultures are not recognized; their histories are ignored; their contributions to knowledge are neglected.

Today the effects of the American public education system's history are still seen. School funding is localized and largely dependent on the socioeconomic status of the population surrounding the school, so areas in which underprivileged citizens were originally forced to live continue to be underfunded in contrast to the areas in which those with greater privilege, wealth, and power congregate. In addition, the curriculum in schools is centered around Western values and works, which continues to alienate those of marginalized cultures and identities. For these reasons, schools can be especially harmful to students of historically marginalized identities, which only increases the need for special considerations when

implementing new classroom practices. As we work to truly create a “great equalizer” in education, it is imperative that diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging permeate all aspects of the school experience.

This guide is a compilation of practices that *could* be used when integrating mindfulness practices into the classroom. That, by no means, means that these are the only ways to do so. In fact, they are only a handful of ways in which to foster emotional well-being in the classroom that I recognized as valuable because of my experiences, beliefs, and traditions. Others exist and should be explored in order to honor all students and reap the value of our diverse student population.

Some key tenets to return to when considering the equity of your classroom mindfulness practices are as follows.

- **Space:** Allow space for all students in your classroom. This requires a commitment to providing safe spaces to heal from systemic oppression in the ways students need.
- **Honesty:** Practicing mindfulness in the classroom should always be honest—honest to students’ pasts, histories, and realities. Students should also be allowed and encouraged to authentically feel. No mindfulness practice should ever tell a student how to express an emotion or how to feel in any given situation.
- **Invitation:** Invite students to try mindfulness practices in the classroom but be aware they may not accept the invitation for whatever reason. Do not require an explanation.
- **Variety:** Providing, modeling, and implementing a variety of ways through which students can practice mindfulness in your classroom allows students to do what is best for them without being further marginalized. Having a choice whenever possible in all classroom practices, but especially mindfulness is essential to developing authentically equitable classrooms.
- **Diversity and Inclusion with Honor:** If a student shares a cultural tradition and invites the class to participate in it, recognize the value of the tradition without labeling it as somehow unusual. Labeling traditions as unusual assumes that the experiences of those

with privilege are the default, which further oppresses marginalized populations. Actively resist this assumption.

Finally, learn with and from your students. Celebrate a cultural tradition a student chooses to share with you. Commit to continually gaining insight into the lived experiences of your students and developing cultural competence. Actively resist the systems that divide and subdue certain students. The classroom should be a safe space in which students can be vulnerable, authentic, and honest without fear of intolerance. There will likely be misunderstandings, miscommunications, and a host of other “misses”, but when handled in a loving, accepting, and humble way, these moments can bring the classroom closer together and make strides towards a more celebrating, understanding, and loving world.

Special Education

The impetus for the creation of this guide was my experiences in special education, and since then, I have had the opportunity to observe how mindfulness can be used as a tool for a variety of students with special needs.

After students are deemed eligible for special education services, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) is developed. This document details specific goals for the student and the methods through which teachers should support students in reaching those goals. Generally, these goals cover academic content and socialization, depending on the student’s needs. Oftentimes students who have been deemed eligible for special needs services have difficulties expressing and regulating their emotions, but these difficulties are overlooked when creating IEP goals.

My mother always wanted my emotional needs to be addressed within these goals, which is a very good idea. Not only would including goals pertaining to emotional awareness and regulation require a student receives support to develop these areas, but it would also reflect that students’ emotional needs are equally as important as academically-centered needs—a necessity if we are committing to educating

students *holistically*. Emotional awareness and regulatory goals could be in addition to a student's academic goals or intertwined throughout their academic goals.

Once goals addressing emotional needs are included in a student's IEP, mindfulness practices could be one of the ways the goals are achieved. Mindfulness practices as outlined throughout this guide can be used in both general and special education classrooms and can be differentiated to meet the diverse needs of students.

When implementing mindfulness practices for students with special needs, it is even more important to do so at the beginning of the school year and in an established routine, as sudden changes and inconsistent routines can be troubling and triggering for students with a variety of disabilities.

Finally, when discussing special education, it is important to recognize the variety of students that fall under this umbrella. Both students with special needs and students that qualify for gifted education can benefit from increased support utilizing mindfulness practices to work towards improved emotional awareness and regulation. I was a student receiving gifted education services, and while my cognitive needs were always met to ensure I could succeed to my highest potential, my emotional needs were rarely, if ever, addressed. Again, if we want an equitable and holistic education for all students, we need to recognize and pursue fulfilling the cognitive, emotional, social, and physical needs of *all* students.

Chapter 5

Obstacles and Opposition

The incipient stages of any initiative are always challenging—they can be met with doubt, opposition, and sometimes complete refusal. This guide is designed to seamlessly integrate mindfulness into the classroom in the absence of a school-wide mindfulness initiative; however, there still may be pushback from parents, administrators, taxpayers, and students to even just classroom integration. There are a variety of reasons for this, but none are insurmountable with the correct information, proper communication, and innovative solutions.

Temporal and Curriculum Demands

One of the most considerable hesitations you may encounter will be based on the lack of time teachers have to plan, participate in professional development, meet content standards, take care of administrative duties, and manage crises. How could there possibly be room to fit one more thing into a teacher's schedule? Into a curriculum map?

The practices in this guide are designed to work in conjunction with existing instructional practices, rather than be an additional element. Instead of approaching mindfulness in the classroom as an additional patch in your instructional practice quilt, view it as the threads within the existing patches. As an integration into your educational philosophy, instruction practices, and classroom community, implementing mindfulness is much less overwhelming for both teachers and students.

Additionally, with more practice, using mindfulness practices in your teaching will become second nature. The nature of English language arts provides an organic opportunity for this integration, so while it may seem like one more thing to fit into an already too-short class period, simple adjustments to

your instructional strategies and focus areas allow mindfulness to seamlessly exist within your current practices.

Even the mentioned practices that seem to stand alone (“Bellringer Activities”, for example) are designed to be short and fit into a well-designed class period. As these become established practices, students will see them as a part of the normal routine as well, rather than an additional portion of class.

If your school necessitates standards for all lessons that occur in the classroom, you can find or create a standards-based mindfulness curriculum that complements existing standards in your curriculum. There are many options of existing sets of standards and curricula for mindfulness; just be sure whichever you choose is equitable and inclusive, as well as adaptable and accessible. *Learning to Breathe*, designed by Penn State University Research Associate Patricia Broderick is a popular option right now. Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn even wrote the foreword of the curricula literature.

Regional Beliefs/Demographics

The localized structure of the public school system creates a great variance in what is acceptable in schools across the country. Therefore, you may find yourself working in an area in which the local community does not see the value of mindfulness practices in the classroom. Remember that you will not be able to convince everyone of the value of mindfulness. However, below are some tips for engaging in conversations with educational stakeholders that disagree with the integration of mindfulness into your classroom.

- As always in conversation, practice **active listening** and **be open-minded** to what the other person has to say. Not allowing others to speak or ignoring what they say will only cause resentment and misunderstanding to grow. You do not have to agree with their arguments, but showing respect and acknowledging that you hear what they are saying will bring the conversation closer to a positive resolution. In listening to what they say,

you may hear a point you had not previously considered; demonstrate humility and be open to considering it. You may find that you actually have some common beliefs from which to build toward a resolution. Additionally, understanding how the other person views mindfulness, the education system, your classroom, etc. will allow you to better clarify any misconceptions, justify your decisions, and prepare for future conversations of this sort.

- Speak **clearly** and **accurately** about what mindfulness is and how it betters your classroom. As teachers, we are constantly explaining concepts, events, plots, and skills in a variety of different ways—leverage that skill in these conversations. Have a variety of easy-to-understand explanations, examples, and anecdotes to share with your audience. Do not try to make yourself sound smart by using big words or complex analogies the other person will not understand due to their unfamiliarity with the topic—again, this will only breed resentment and misunderstanding. Finally, be aware of buzzwords from the media and how their usage could drastically alter the course of your discussion and the view the other person has of you.
- Be able to **justify the choices you make** within your classroom and know the sources with which to defend your claims. Know where to find credible data and be able to explain it. Do not embellish your claims or anecdotes with unsubstantiated information—there is no need to; the data alone is in your favor.
- **Know when to step away** from a discussion if it becomes hostile, unsafe, or in any way averse to reaching either a solution, compromise, or simple understanding to avoid this from happening, establish some rules and boundaries at the beginning of the discussion about how you will participate in civil discourse.
- **Engage your personal mindfulness practices** during these conversations. If you begin to sense feelings of overwhelming anger, resentment, defensiveness, hostility, etc.,

acknowledge them for what they are and help yourself return to the present without guilt for becoming emotional. Excuse yourself for some deep breathing and to recall what is of importance in the conversation. If you cannot bring yourself back to neutral and collected headspace from which to continue the conversation, ask those whom you are conversing with if they would be able to postpone the conversation until you are better able to participate in civil discourse. Practicing mindfulness in action for the benefit of your discussion with someone who doubts its value may have more of an effect on them than your words ever could.

Financial Concerns

Financial concerns are one of the most—if not the most—pressing concerns for schools. Many schools lack the funding for basic supplies: How could schools fund new initiatives?

It is important to keep in mind that practicing mindfulness in the classroom does not need to cost anything: not for the school and not for you, the teacher. The methods outlined in this text can all be done without expending any additional fiscal resources. Adjustments to instructional practices, class discussions, and mindfulness exercises do not cost a dime to implement.

However, if you would like to engage in practices that require additional materials or personnel, there are options you can explore to gain funding:

- **Grants:** Grants are funds that do not need to be paid back to the sponsor and can come from a variety of sources—federal, state, and local governments, as well as private companies. You need to complete an application for most grants, but with the topic of mindfulness gaining more validity, you should be able to make a strong case on applications.

- **Foundations:** Does your school have a foundation? Some schools have foundations that have been funded by munificent residents and can help support new initiatives that other forms of aid do not.

Gaining additional funding may be difficult, but our values are shown where our time and money are spent. Should you be able to garner aid from one of these sources, it also communicates to nay-sayers that you are not the only person that sees value in these practices, which will increase their buy-in, or at least lessen their doubts.

Increasing Buy-in

Aside from the above-listed reasons, some stakeholders may just be skeptical—including administration, colleagues, and students.

Administration and Colleagues

When discussing the implementation of mindfulness in your classroom, be sure to know the facts, data, and statistics of the benefits of mindfulness. Provide supporting literature and maybe even ask them to join you for a mindfulness practice in your classroom or take them through an exercise one-on-one. If you have already implemented the practice into your classrooms and are looking to expand it and justify it to new administrators, ask students to give testimonies of mindfulness at work in their personal and academic lives.

Students

Some students will not buy into the implementation of mindfulness at first, and some may never—that is okay. Teachers do many things in their classrooms that not all students believe in, yet teachers continue to do them for the academic and personal well-being of their classes as a whole. There may be some underlying issues causing their opposition, in which case this is probably not the only thing they are pushing back on. Dig into the heart of the issue with the help of guidance counselors if necessary. If students choose not to participate, that is fine; just ask them to be respectful of those that do and the time during which you do so.

When you are attempting to gain student buy-in, be honest with your students. Share your personal story, as you have your own mindfulness practice on which to base it. Hearing that you believe in this practice enough to practice it yourself and you also experienced positive results will greatly increase student attitudes toward mindfulness.

Chapter 6

Conclusions and Recommendations

This guide is in no way comprehensive, nor should it be read as the absolute authority on this subject. However, I do hope it has in some way inspired you to pursue a mindfulness practice of some variety in your classroom for the emotional well-being of your students. As you begin this pursuit, there are some final things to remember:

- As with academic content, you should understand the background, science, and implementation of mindfulness before teaching it.
- Practice mindfulness in your personal life, not just for the benefit of your classroom, but also for your personal well-being as a human outside of an educational setting.
- Only take on what you can. Know your limits and accept that you will not be able to do everything—that is okay! Completely changing your classroom space and instructional practices in one school year will be overwhelming. Start small and add in what you can when you can. Your work is still valuable and a single, well-implemented mindfulness practice is more effective than an extensive, but desultory, mindfulness practice led by a distressed teacher.
- Build a support system within your community of colleagues. Chances are, other teachers around you recognize the need for emotional supports and would love to work with you to implement a possible solution. Teaching should be social and collective work; make it so.
- Ask for help when you need it. Whether you are struggling professionally or personally, teaching academic content or emotive content, there are resources for you within your school, community, and national network of educational professionals. Capitalize on them.

A mindful teacher...

Is	Does	Can
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Aware of student needs. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • View students as complex, emotional human beings. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintain high standards while supporting students' emotional needs.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considers their effect on their classroom. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Take care of their own mental health and emotional well-being. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help students avoid emotional crises.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Proactive in supporting students. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocates for <i>all</i> students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Change student lives.

Table 3. A Mindful Teacher...

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ACADEMIC VITA

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Education

The Pennsylvania State University, University Park, PA

- Bachelor of Science in Secondary English Education, Minor in Spanish Language (May 2023)

Field Experience

Student-Teacher, Altoona Area High School, Altoona, PA

Advanced Placement English Literature and Composition, English 12, SAT Preparation

- Created *Macbeth* unit plan with differentiations for diverse abilities across and among class periods
- Used the instruction of canonical texts to foster whole-class discussions about current social issues
- Designed multi-modal instructional materials for increased student engagement
- Participated in department curriculum creation following the Reading Workshop framework
- Constructed collaborative, multi-modal, and creative assessments to allow for various modes of knowledge demonstration and student success
- Utilized Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction techniques for increased student well-being
- Engaged in community events to foster relationships with parents and students beyond the classroom

Paraprofessional, ESS BLaST Intermediate Unit 17, Williamsport, PA (May 2022– July 2022)

- Demonstrated professionalism when handling confidential student information
- Progress-monitored students' intellectual, emotional, and social growth according to individualized education plans and Section 504 plans
- Prioritized student interests in the creation of instructional content
- Implemented positive and inclusive classroom management strategies to maintain an orderly, safe, and enjoyable classroom environment

Virtual Tutor, Juniata Park Academy (January 2022 – April 2022)

- Prepared culturally relevant lessons for emergent multilingual students with a teaching team
- Employed translanguaging strategies to foster students' entire language repertoire in all subjects

Employment

Peer Mentor, Public Speaking Center, University Park (January 2021 – December 2022)

- Offered patrons personalized advice and criticism throughout the entire speech-writing process, based on their needs and academic goals

Resident Assistant, Penn State University Residence Life (August 2021 – December 2022)

- Oversaw 125 diverse co-ed residents with various special living accommodations
- Planned social and educational programs with the Residence Life team
- Promoted community involvement by modeling participation in campus events, while balancing personal and academic responsibilities

Affiliations

Sigma Kappa, National Council of English Teachers, Pennsylvania State Educator Association, Pi Lambda Theta, Phi Kappa Phi, Pennsylvania Council of Teachers of English and Language Arts