



## **Mindfulness in the Professional Lives of K-12 Educators**

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**Abstract:** This interpretive case study explored how K-12 educators conceptualized and related mindfulness to their professional lives while completing the Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques (SMART) in Education mindfulness-based intervention program. Participants were able to construct an understanding of mindfulness and noted increased present moment focus, expanded awareness, and a greater sense of neutrality or reduced judgment. Educators who practiced mindfulness regularly reported strengthened compassion, improved relational quality, and a stronger sense of empowerment. The study suggests that mindfulness for educators presents opportunities for individual and school transformation, although the amount of school change participants reported was influenced by systemic support and privilege. Strengthening relational quality in schools, empowering teachers, and shifting school culture from places of cultural reproduction to those of transformation may more effectively address the sources of teacher stress and create relational spaces that support teaching and learning.

**Keywords:** mindfulness, teacher, educator, relational quality, compassion

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### **Introduction**

Mindfulness in education has gained a great deal of attention in recent years, yet few studies explore contextual nuances or describe how mindfulness is understood by educators and related to teacher work. Current literature largely focuses on teacher well-being, stress reduction, and social-emotional learning as a method for improving teaching skills and student learning. Mindfulness-based interventions might also create space for educators to connect, reflect, and transform.

Educators view mindfulness training as a meaningful, positive experience that improves well-being and professional work (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Herrmann & Gallo, 2013; Jennings et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2012; Roeser et al., 2013; Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Several studies provide evidence that mindfulness training for K-12 teachers can improve teacher resiliency (Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013; Schussler et al., 2018). Additionally,

improving one's ability to attend to students with open awareness in the present moment is thought to enhance the teacher-student relationship and positively influence the learning environment (Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Yet findings from a limited number of studies are to be considered cautiously (Schussler et al., 2018) and studies that explore participant meaning in context are needed to better understand diverse experiences.

The purpose of this study is to understand how K-12 educators make meaning of mindfulness and explain how they relate it to teaching and learning. An interpretive theoretical lens is used to document and describe educator experiences. This can be the first step to identifying the variety of ways that mindfulness-based interventions are received by educators and considering implications for program design as well as new research questions.

Participants who committed to regular mindfulness practice during an 8-week Stress Management and Relaxation Techniques (SMART) in Education program discussed changes that they attributed to improving their professional and personal lives. Participants who did not establish a daily practice did not experience many changes even though they saw value in the training. Shared understanding of mindfulness included present moment observation, awareness, and a greater sense of neutrality that fostered compassionate responsiveness to others. These attributes were linked with improved relational quality and personal empowerment in professional work.

Additionally, this study revealed significant differences between two school sites. Experiences differed between participants in an affluent, suburban school setting and those in an at-risk, urban school district. Levels of privilege and systemic support altered educator experience with mindfulness training and practice. The study highlights that although mindfulness practice as an individualistic tool to strengthen well-being was valued by participants, it is also important to address contextual differences and how educators are empowered to meet professional challenges. Systemic support and privilege may play a role in teacher experiences with mindfulness.

Research examining mindfulness-based interventions for K-12 teachers is currently establishing foundational knowledge. This study responds to the call for additional exploratory and descriptive research and contributes to contextual knowledge to better understand how educators make meaning of mindfulness. Multiple studies recommend the need for qualitative research to provide rich, contextual information related to mindfulness educator training (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Roeser et al., 2012; Sharp & Jennings, 2015). This study captures personal meaning and descriptions of how participants explain mindfulness in the context of their work. It also extends the conversation of mindfulness for educators beyond pragmatic concerns to consider issues of teacher empowerment, the role of privilege, and individual and school change. Although there is evidence that mindfulness improves a sense of well-being, resiliency, and social emotional development, mindfulness additionally offers leverage for transformation of educational structures.

### **Overview of Relevant Literature Review**

Research specific to mindfulness-based interventions for K-12 educators suggests improvements in stress management, well-being, social-emotional regulation, and relationships with students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2012). The specific mechanisms by which mindfulness strengthens these areas is still in development. One promising line of research suggests that adults engaging in regular mindfulness practice develop meta-awareness that fosters improved attention in the present moment, clearer quality in the

content of consciousness, ability to inhibit irrelevant processes or thoughts, and self-regulation (Jankowski & Holas, 2014). Mindfulness appears to reduce cognitive rigidity and allow flexibility of thought (Greenberg, Reiner & Meiran, 2012). Such cognitive flexibility allows for positive reappraisal of stressors (Hanley et al., 2014). Positive reappraisal is the process of reinterpreting stressful events as harmless or even meaningful and beneficial (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984 as cited in Hanley et al., 2014; Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Adults with regular mindful meditation practice tend to use reappraisal coping to handle stressors more frequently than those who are less experienced or less regular in their practice (Hanley et al., 2014). Enhancing one's ability to reappraise stressful situations is certainly a helpful life skill and one that would benefit K-12 educators as they navigate work stress. However, it is also important to consider sources of teacher work stress and critically examine educational structures that may create less than ideal teaching and learning spaces.

To best understand systemic sources of teacher stress, it helps to position the teaching profession in the political, social, and cultural climate that American educators navigate. The empiricist philosophy common in public education values schools as models of efficiency and places a high value on empirical testing and verification (Flinders & Thornton, 2013). Teachers and students often experience separation, rigid rules, restrictive evaluation, and institutional conformity (Jackson, 1990). This system undervalues and manages teachers' knowledge, intensifies their work, and isolates them in ways that leave few opportunities for collaboration or empowerment (Apple, 2004 in Flinders & Thornton, 2013). Research indicates that teacher satisfaction with their profession has steadily decreased in the last 25 years (McCarthy et al., 2014) and that up to 30% of teachers experience psychological ill-being or burnout (Milatz et al., 2015).

In several studies focused on mindfulness-based interventions, teachers noted how extreme workload and the stress of teaching leads to exhaustion (Jennings & Schonart-Reichl, 2014; Roeser et al., 2013; Sharp & Jennings, 2015; Trumbower, 2015). In a public education model influenced by neoliberal policies and reforms, teachers are not viewed as relational and empowered professionals (Giroux, 2015; Hargreaves & Fullan, 2013; Slouka, 2009). Yet teachers commonly name the relational quality of their work to be of greatest importance (McCarthy et al., 2014; Milatz et al., 2015). Social support and interaction serve as a stress buffering system (Ditzen & Heinrichs, 2014 as cited in Milatz et al., 2015). Positive relationships with colleagues and supervisors are noted as a helpful coping strategy that offsets work stress (Certo & Fox, 2002). Relationships with students can be an important source of enjoyment in a teacher's work life (Milatz et al., 2015). Additionally, teacher relationships with students have "been shown to be among the top ten predictors for students' academic outcomes" in hundreds of studies (Hattie, 2009 as cited in Milatz, et al., 2015, p. 2). We must consider that nurturing relationships is an important and necessary task for schools, and one that is often overlooked.

Many teachers entering classrooms take on a new identity that is contrary to the relational reasons they entered the teaching profession; this school-shaped identity feels false and leads to a sense of separation and dissatisfaction (Casbon et al., 2005). For example, a new teacher in this study voiced her surprise and discomfort with the realities of teaching as she struggled with a large class size, limited parent and administrative support, expectations in a data-driven environment, and classroom management challenges. She was already considering leaving the profession in her third year as a classroom teacher because she did not feel she was part of supportive, relational community. But when teachers are invited to rediscover and express their true identity in their profession, they feel more authentic and engaged (Casbon et al., 2005).

Teachers who experience spaces of care and trust in professional work also bring that same awareness into their classrooms and find strength to question authority (Casbon et al., 2005). Mindfulness-based interventions as professional development may provide opportunities to promote connection, reflection, and support to make new choices.

Mindfulness is associated with enhanced capacities for relationships (Brown et al., 2007). Mindfulness-based interventions can create spaces to support relational wellness and provide a unique approach to teacher growth and development. Palmer (1998) believed that excellent teaching originates from identity and integrity rather than reducing teaching to a set of techniques. In this view, educator growth involves developing authentic practitioners with renewed connections to self and present context (Intrator & Kunzman, 2009). This is precisely what mindfulness practices aim to develop. This unique type of professional development opens space to rediscover their own knowledge, voice, and strength (Casbon et al., 2005; Intrator & Kunzman, 2006).

Another area of related literature identifies the development of professional dispositions or habits of mind for teachers (Dottin, 2009; National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2006 as cited in Roeser et al., 2012). Examples of effective habits of mind for educators include emotional regulation, reflecting in a nonjudgmental way, observing and gathering data, resiliency, empathy, and compassion (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Evidence of occupational self-compassion in teachers who have participated in mindfulness training is encouraging (Roeser et al., 2013). Mindfulness-based interventions may include practices that focus on building compassion and empathy (Greenberg & Harris, 2012; Herrmann & Gallo, 2013). In one case study, participants shared that they experienced a sense of increased compassion and began to implement mindfulness practices in their classrooms (Herrmann & Gallo, 2013). Empathy and compassion may buffer burnout and future research that explores the link between mindfulness and compassion should be explored (Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Participants in this study noted greater compassion towards self and others and related it to improved relational quality.

A shift in perspective is needed to create a healthy relational space in educational structures that will support K-12 teachers and students. The current technical rational view of education seeks to improve student achievement, yet it deemphasizes the very important role of human relationships in that process. Mindfulness-based interventions may offer promise for individual and collective change.

### **Method**

The interpretivist theoretical lens selected for this study adopts a constructivist view that assumes that reality is socially constructed, intersubjective, and represented in diverse ways as people make meaning (Butin, 2010; Lukenchuk, 2013; Stake, 1995). Case study methodology is grounded in a constructivist paradigm that values human construction of meaning (Baxter & Jack, 2008). As qualitative data is collected and analyzed in this frame, the researcher's role is to examine patterns of meaning and describe the participant experience (Butin, 2010). This study was exploratory and remained open to patterns of meaning that arose from the data. Descriptive and exploratory research can inform contextual understanding in mindfulness-based interventions (Greenburg & Harris, 2012; Roeser et al., 2012; Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Research situated in this frame seeks to explore how people understand their experiences and construct meaning (Merriam, 1998).

A case study design best suited this study to explore educator understanding and

experience in a particular context (Merriam, 1998). Case study research is grounded in natural settings and situates the participants and researcher in context (Creswell, 2006; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Miles et al., 2014; Yin, 2003). An important feature of case study methodology is that it “investigates a unique, contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009, p. 18). Case study is a preferred approach to examine contemporary events when behaviors of participants cannot be manipulated or separated from context (Yin, 2009). This study values understanding experience within a complex, contextual setting, co-construction of meaning by participants and researcher, and inductive analysis (Lukenchuk, 2013; Miles et al., 2014). It provides an in-depth, rich exploration of meaning, and values a holistic story (Creswell, 2006; Merriam, 1998; Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 1995; Travers, 2004).

The use of broad research questions that ask “how” or “why” is typical in case study design and the intention is to remain flexible and open as data is gathered (Swanborn, 2010; Yin, 2003). Two research questions guided this study:

1. How do K-12 educators make meaning of mindfulness?
2. How do educators relate mindfulness to teaching and learning?

### **Positionality and Reflexivity**

The life experiences a researcher brings to the field is made transparent to recognize the inherent subjectivity of research and allow readers to make their own determination around confirmability (Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 1995). This process allows the researcher to “unravel how their biographies intersect with their interpretation of field experiences” (Finlay, 2003, p. 4). It would be remiss of me to not to examine my own tradition of contemplative practice and how I came to this work. When I entered the research field, I had a fifteen-year contemplative practice in yoga, a six-year practice in Vipassana meditation, and a twenty-five-year career as an educator. As a seasoned educator, I was well acquainted with the challenges, frustrations and stress that occupy the work lives of many teachers. The questions a researcher will ask is influenced by their experiences. Complete detachment from one’s research is not possible (Horsburgh, 2003). However, every effort was made to let the data speak for itself and conversations with participants illuminated diversity.

Reflexivity and attention to trustworthiness in research practices were attended to throughout the research process. Reflexivity, an effort to examine one’s beliefs and positionality, was a regular practice. The researcher journal was a tool used to reflect on areas of potential bias and record researcher experiences and thoughts. Additionally, a bracketing interview to reveal and explore potential research bias was completed prior to data collection.

### **Participants and Context**

This study is bounded by place and time, a characteristic of case study design (Stake, 1995). The SMART in Education training for K-12 educators took place in the Rocky Mountain region of the United States. Two sites were included in the study, one an affluent suburban school (Site 1) and the other an urban school district with a high at-risk student population (Site 2). Data collection took place during an 11-week time frame in Fall 2016. This included the 8-week mindfulness program schedule that skipped two weeks to match school district schedules plus one week following the last session to complete interviews and collect final documents. Nine educators, four located at Site 1 and five at Site 2, participated in this study and were concurrently working in K-12 public school districts. The inclusion of multiple participants at

two sites represents a single case with embedded units design (Baxter & Jack, 2008).

There was a total of 50 educators registered at the two sites, including four males and 46 females. Nine participants volunteered for the study and gave written informed consent as required by the university institutional review board procedures. Names in this report were changed to honor confidentiality. No compensation for participation was provided. Participant years of teaching ranged from 3 to 20 with an average of 14.4 years. All but two had earned master’s degrees and six worked at the elementary level, two worked across the K-12 spectrum, and one worked at the high school level. Participants were predominantly female with one male and predominantly white with one person of color, although this was representative of the overall gender and ethnicity enrollment during this SMART in Education session. Participant demographics are found in Table 1.

**Table 1**  
*Participant Demographics*

	Ellen	Maisy	Stephanie	Greg	Mavis	Grace	Ann	Mollie	Charlotte
Site									
Location	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	2
Years Employed as Educator	16	20	9	17	13	18	3	17	17
Current Role	SP	SP	SP	CL	SP	ADM	CL	SP	CL
Level	Elem	Elem	Elem	Elem	K-12	Elem	Elem	K-12	HS
Education	MA	MA	MA	MA	MA	MA	BA	MA	BA
Gender	F	F	F	M	F	F	F	F	F
Ethnicity	White	White	White	White	White	Minority	White	White	White
Prior MF	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No

*Note.* Current Role Abbreviations include SP = specialist; CL = classroom teacher; ADM = administrator

At the suburban site (Site 1) the four participants, one male and three female, were experienced educators who worked in the same elementary school. Their years of experience in education ranged from 9 to 20 years with an average of 15.5 years. Two had prior experience with mindfulness while two were new to mindfulness. All reported that they registered for this training to be part of a school mindfulness goal aimed to bring mindfulness practices into all classrooms and also thought there would be personal benefits. These participants noted strong well-being at the beginning of the study and felt they had positive life habits in place to effectively deal with stress. All completed requirements to receive professional development.

At the urban site (Site 2) five female participants volunteered to participate in the study. Two worked in elementary schools, one worked at a high school, and two worked across the K-

12 spectrum in the district. Their years of experience in education ranged from 3 to 18 years and average 13.6 years. These participants had less familiarity with mindfulness and primarily registered to learn new strategies to manage stress. Several stated that they felt they needed this training to deal with high levels of work stress, and four indicated mediocre to poor sense of well-being at the beginning of the training.

All study participants completed the program as well as the study, although one participant at Site 2 did not complete suggested home mindfulness practice and did not submit the practice log document. The training was offered for free or for a nominal registration, often ranging from \$25.00 to \$75.00 depending on the school district.

The purpose of the program is captured in the registration statement, “SMART supports participants in: re-connecting to personal and professional meaning and purpose, finding balance and cultivating emotional intelligence, and improving mental and physical health” (Passageworks, 2014). SMART in Education is described as 70% Mindfulness Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) curriculum and 30% SMART curriculum including social emotional content and examples that relate to classroom work (R. Wilensky, personal communication, December 4, 2015). The curriculum included: mindfulness practices, creating a new habit, mindful listening, setting intentions, observing sensations, thoughts and emotions, effects of stress, responding versus reacting, emotions and emotional reactivity, working with anger, forgiveness, kindness and compassion, and a state of being as compared with a state of doing.

Although different facilitators led the two cohorts, the curriculum and mindfulness practices were consistent between sites. The program consisted of 2-hour group meetings each week for eight weeks, a half-day Saturday retreat devoted to mindfulness practice, and encouraged daily practice. An additional 14 hours or 840 minutes of mindfulness practice outside of group meetings, completion of logs, and a final reflection paper were required if one desired formal professional development credit.

Each session included multiple mindfulness practices, such as mindful eating, mindful movement, body scan, sitting meditation, and loving kindness meditation, as well as shared content and discussion. Chairs were arranged in a circle and facilitators utilized an invitational, participatory approach. Periodic open dialogue in dyads, small groups, and whole group took place. Both facilitators emphasized self-compassion and reflection on one’s own experiences.

### **Data Collection and Analysis**

Case study methodology uses multiple data sources to allow for triangulation of data and strengthened confidence in findings (Creswell, 1994; Swanborn, 2010; Yin, 2009). Data sources included interviews with individuals during the first three weeks and last two weeks of the study, participant practice logs and final essays, SMART in Education curriculum materials, school district goals, school demographics, and field notes. The researcher assumed a participant-observer role and field notes were taken during SMART in Education sessions. Weekly research summaries compiled data and supported data analysis. Individual interviews with participants were in person, 20-50 minutes in length, semi-structured, audiotaped, and transcribed. Interview questions related to sources of work stress, approaches to and regularity of mindfulness practice, views about the training, content and mindfulness practices, descriptions of mindfulness, examples, challenges and benefits, and observations of change. Participants were encouraged to add additional information and interviews were purposefully open-ended. Desimone (2009) notes that interviews and observations are one of the most appropriate methods to understand and describe a contextual professional development experience. Member checking involved returning

transcribed interviews to participants to make changes, ask for clarification, and confirm data.

The constant comparative method of data analysis was used to identify emerging patterns in the data (Merriam, 1998). This method involves “continuous comparison of incidents, respondents’ remarks, and so on with each other. Units of data – bits of information – are literally sorted into groupings that have something in common” (Merriam, 1998, p. 179). This method begins with coding. Coding provides a strategy to examine words or phrases that participants use to communicate meaning (Merriam, 1998; Miles et al., 2014). All transcribed interviews were coded by hand using a priori and in vivo codes for first cycle coding (Miles et al., 2014). Approximately 50 a priori codes were created to begin coding and these were generated using current literature at the time of the study. Examples of a priori codes include awareness, attention, kindness/compassion, forgiveness, patience, benefits, challenges, stress, and others that were expected to arise during interviews. Additional in vivo codes arose from participant language (Miles et al., 2014). Subcodes for certain concepts were utilized, such as in the case of teacher stress to help identify various sources of teacher stress. As new codes emerged, they were also applied to previously coded transcripts. In total, 200 codes were used in the first level analysis.

Codes were then arranged into categories with similar meaning for second level analysis. For example, the phrases “in the present” and “right now” represented different vocabulary for the concept present moment. The frequency for each meaning code was then tabulated and ranked. Codes were next organized by frequency for the entire group, each site, individuals, and examined in relationship to research questions, practice logs, and final essays.

This information was analyzed and assertions and propositions were developed. “An assertion is a declarative statement of summative synthesis, supported by confirming evidence from the data and revised when disconfirming evidence or discrepant cases require modification of the assertion” (Miles et al., 2014, p. 99). A proposition suggests a conditional event or a relationship (Miles et al., 2014). For example, the data revealed differences between participants that committed to regular daily practice and those that did not. The resulting proposition was, “Participants who committed to regular practice and completed 800 or more minutes of home practice reported greater change and explained mindfulness in more detail.” The construction of assertions, propositions, and memos allows the researcher to begin to reflect upon and develop early analysis (Miles et al., 2014). Matrices were developed and exploration of rival themes and outliers were explored before developing themes (Miles et al., 2014). Outlier experiences were included in the findings. For example, one person who did not adopt regular practice also shared valuable insights about mindfulness and the role of privilege that were included in the findings. Data source triangulation, including field notes, interviews, and documents, was used to confirm emerging themes and reduce potential bias (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Miles et al., 2014; Stake, 1995). Patterns that emerged from the data sources were examined and interpreted to develop findings and conclusions (Miles, et al., 2014).

From this process, emerged evidence that: (a) similar understandings of mindfulness existed, (b) those with greater home practice expressed deeper understanding of mindfulness and noted change, and (c) specific individual and site similarities and differences existed to explore further. Continued analysis resulted in the emergence of several categories related to the research questions that reflected the research purpose, were exhaustive, and conceptually congruent (Merriam, 1998).

Inductive analysis is appropriate in qualitative research to allow findings and themes to emerge from the data that are plausible, accurate, and meaningful (Letts et al., 2007; Miles et al.,

2014). A decision was made to organize findings by themes rather than research questions because overlap existed between research questions and the patterns of meaning were better illustrated using theme organization. Three themes emerged from the data: (a) understanding and experiencing mindfulness, (b) holistic personal and professional change, and (c) transforming schools. The first two themes address the first research question: How do K-12 educators make meaning of mindfulness? All three themes, although with greater emphasis on the last two themes, address the second research question: How do educators relate mindfulness to teaching and learning?

### **Findings**

Participants explained how mindfulness practice influenced awareness and how it improved relational quality. There were noticeable differences between individuals who established a consistent mindfulness practice and those who did not. An additional insight emerged while comparing the two sites. There were noticeable contextual differences that supported or inhibited individual and school change. Representative examples are included to honor participant voice.

#### **Theme 1: Understanding and Experiencing Mindfulness**

Participants constructed an understanding of mindfulness and three concepts emerged from the data: (a) present moment focus, (b) expanded awareness, and (c) a greater sense of neutrality or reduced judgment. Data revealed differences between educators who established a regular mindfulness practice and those who did not. Five of the nine participants, Ellen, Maisy, and Stephanie at Site 1 and Mavis and Mollie at Site 2, completed more than 800 minutes of practice outside of group meetings. These individuals integrated mindfulness into daily routines, noted more beneficial changes, and spoke about mindfulness concepts in greater depth.

An increase in present moment focus was noted. Mavis explained that mindfulness is “being able to live in the present moment, to identify your thoughts, your feelings, your emotions” and being able to sit with those observations. Observing in the present moment allowed participants to pay attention to subtleties that might have once gone unnoticed in their environments, thoughts, or emotions.

The concept of expanded awareness emerged from the data. The phrases “being aware,” “noticing,” and “in touch with” connected with the concept of awareness. Awareness of environmental surroundings, one’s emotions, and considering the needs of others were topics noted. In some examples, participants linked greater awareness of emotions with choosing a response. During a stressful day, Charlotte explained how she realized that she needed to take a moment for herself and found a quiet place to breathe for a few minutes. She recounted:

It was that day I had to take a pause in the locker room. I think that’s why I needed that because I did notice that it was happening. Even in the meeting where I was getting more angry, I knew that I was getting angry so I also knew that I needed to hold my tongue and I needed to just think before I could speak and I needed to process it.

Participants who completed over 800 minutes of home practice, spoke about awareness in greater depth and began to attend to patterns in their minds or actions. Maisy said that mindfulness “shifts your thinking.” Her growing self-awareness was traced over several weeks. In our second interview she noted, “I really think a lot of my reactions, my emotions for me, stem from the inability to forgive, which is a huge recognition ... I’m starting to see this little pattern.” She explained, “I have more awareness about underlying feelings. And if I’m going to

forgive myself or if I'm going to do whatever, if I'm not really aware of the source I can't make any growth changes in myself." This evidence suggests a deeper self-awareness emerging.

Not all participants expressed that they had experienced significant changes in awareness. Those who practiced infrequently spoke about their experiences differently. Ann's realization was to begin to recognize emotions and then let them go, although she noticed few other changes. Grace said she did not experience changes beyond noticing more in her environment and working to increase mindful listening with students. Interestingly, despite her claim that she saw no significant changes, she offered a unique explanation of mindfulness that some might argue captures a deep understanding. Grace explained, "It's like an awakening or an awareness of yourself, but also way more than yourself because I think people are always really focused on themselves, but not in this type of way, not in a positive, metacognitive sort of way." She likened becoming more mindful to "waking up from a fog or mist where you cannot see clearly." Experienced practitioners often describe a sense of awakening to our habits of mind, conditioned reactions, and deeper awareness (Yates, 2015).

The final mindfulness concept that emerged from the data was experiencing a state of calm neutrality and reduced judgment. Participants frequently described a strengthened sense of calm, peacefulness, or steadiness. Most spoke about experiencing less judgment and connected this with being kinder to oneself or another. Ann stated, "The big part that I really like is the nonjudgmental part of it; don't beat yourself up about it. You won't be perfect, just recognize those feelings and let it go." A sense of relief was present as participants released harsh self-judgment and transitioned to greater self-acceptance and self-compassion.

At the beginning of the study, all participants commented that it was difficult to find time in their schedules to practice mindfulness. However, those who established a regular practice no longer indicated that time was a barrier in final interviews. Instead, they talked about how they felt more efficient with their time and prioritized better. Stephanie commented, "It really benefits your time; it makes you feel like you spend your time wisely." They shifted their view to believe that making time for mindfulness was important and expressed that mindfulness practice felt essential to maintain well-being. Additionally, they noticed multiple changes, including less worry, more self-care, improved sleep, decreased rumination, attending more to others, and improved relationships. By comparison, those who did not establish a regular practice expressed that they continued to struggle with time and had not experienced significant long-lasting changes even though they found the practices useful. Those who successfully established a regular practice explained that they used multiple, short practices scattered throughout each day. The type of home mindfulness practices selected varied, and the data indicated that commitment to regular practice using any of the options to be valuable.

## **Theme 2: Holistic Personal and Professional Change**

Interestingly, when participants were asked questions related to the second research question to better understand how they related mindfulness to teaching and learning they frequently interwove examples from professional and personal lives together in responses. They spoke about mindfulness holistically and felt that it resulted in kinder and more compassionate responses.

Mindfulness was integrated into both professional and personal lives. There were many examples of more actively listening, considering another's perspective, and being more present with family members as well as students, parents, and colleagues. Participants shared evidence that they were responding in new ways to strengthen relationships. Although they saw the

benefits of mindfulness practice to reduce stress, they emphasized that mindfulness enhanced their lives in many ways.

Participants commonly used phrases such as “less reactive,” “softer,” “gentler,” “kinder,” “calmer,” and “more patient” to describe interactions with others. Some felt that relationships with students were becoming more genuine and enjoyable. A caring relationship is a basic form of connection that builds trust and is necessary in learning spaces (Noddings, 1992). Both students and teachers benefit from classroom relationships (Milatz, et al., 2015).

Participants linked feeling calmer and more patient with the ability to pause, listen, observe, and consider other perspectives. Greg commented, “I feel the difference on the inside. That now it doesn’t have to be this calm exterior as a façade; now the calm exterior is matching a calmer interior, too.” Charlotte said, “I’m watching students. As I’m listening to students, I think I’m also being very mindful about what is it that I’m hearing? And what is it that I’m seeing? And just what’s going on around me and how is it affecting me?” Maisy attributed increased patience and self-reflection to her mindfulness practice and related it to her work with students:

Working with struggling readers you have to have a lot of patience, and again, a lot of that can come back to your own feelings of inadequacy. Sometimes if they’re not getting it and you get frustrated with them, but you are really frustrated at yourself because what you’re doing isn’t working and you’re not sure what to do next. So, I think I’ve had more reflection on stuff like that, like where is my reaction coming from? Why am I having this emotion? So being able to notice that more has been really good because my response, I can change it then. And then my patience level with kids, too, is better because I’m coming from a little bit of a different place. Not every day, but it’s better.

Many participants noticed that being able to create calm within allowed them to engage with others in more constructive ways. Stephanie explained, “The example of being calm about my workload. It has helped me be more present in meetings with my colleagues.” Mavis explained how mindful listening allowed her to be more present and consider other perspectives. She stated, “I’ve really, really tried harder to be there in the moment and actually listen to people and not be ready with my solution because I might be missing something when I’m doing that, and I’m sure some folks can probably sense that I’m not fully present.”

Individuals reported that simply taking a breath and pausing for a moment before responding to another resulted in awareness to listen and consider another’s perspective or one’s response. It is possible that creating a pause allows participants to consider how to be more proactive and avoid unnecessary conflict. Participants expressed that it felt positive to respond in kinder, calmer ways to others and they attributed these moments to effective communication and improved relationships.

They also discussed engaging in more self-compassion. They related self-compassion with releasing a pattern of self-judgment. Greg explained, “I wasn’t always kind to myself ... and I think I’m getting better at, O.K., *let it go*, it just doesn’t matter.” When I asked Charlotte what she had learned about herself, she stated, “That I’m pretty hard on myself. I think I’ve always known that, but I don’t think I’ve actually admitted that. I think I’m harder on myself than anybody else is, so I think being able to forgive myself and just let it be is something I’m still learning.” Mavis echoed similar comments, “I’m very hard on myself. I knew I was, but it was kind of glaring how hard on myself I can be.” Participants provided examples of increasing positive internal dialogue and increasing self-care as methods of countering self-judgment.

Several participants explained that they considered other perspectives more often and this led to greater compassion. Mollie stated she is “seeing things through the other person’s eyes.”

Greg said that it helped him relax and listen to a colleague's concerns. Participants connected a sense of increased calm, patience, forgiveness and compassion towards self and others with improved relationships.

All participants perceived mindfulness practice as more than a stress-reduction tool and those with greater home practice were able to articulate why. They viewed mindfulness practice as a proactive wellness habit that made them better teachers and people. Stephanie explained that she viewed it as a method to prevent stress, improve mental health, and make life feel more meaningful. Mavis stated, "I think it's a way of living because being kind and compassionate to others and also compassionate towards self is way more, I think, than a tool or a practice." Maisy stated in our final interview, "And maybe that's a big takeaway is that this is not supposed to be some separate thing that I do; this is the way I *live*." She additionally explained a distinction between mindfulness as a potential stress-reduction strategy and mindfulness as a state of awareness:

Stress is not the only thing that affects our well-being. I used to think this was about stress management, but really it's about reacting. And reacting isn't necessarily stress. You know, if a student's doing something and I'm feeling frustrated and I overreact, it's not because I'm stressed; I'm just annoyed or feeling inadequate or whatever. So for me, it's the awareness of how I'm reacting. Like I was saying I was noticing my kids, it's noticing. I'm not stressed if I'm cutting vegetables. It's not stressful. But I'm not paying attention to a child who just walked in the door that I haven't seen for eight hours or, so noticing, oh, I should actually be present when I talk to this person.

Maisy continued:

So I think mindfulness is much bigger to me now, at least. Stress is just one really small component of it now that I've gone through all that. And I'm realizing it's helped me more with other things more than it has with the stress because the stress seems somewhat insignificant now compared with some of the other things I've learned.

There were noticeable differences in the depth of explanations between those who had adopted a regular home mindfulness practice and those who did not. There were also subtle differences in the insights among those who had prior mindfulness experience and those who did not. The three participants who completed more than 800 minutes of home practice and had prior experience with mindfulness viewed it as a way of living. Other participants tended to lean towards viewing mindfulness as a tool or strategy, although additionally commented that mindfulness practice was more than a stress-reduction tool even if they were unable to articulate reasons for this belief.

It is further noted in the literature that positive benefits may also be related to the opportunity to participate in a group support program that attends to teacher stress and well-being (Burrows, 2011; Jennings et al., 2013). This study suggests that although participants did not note a benefit from group support while establishing a habit of regular mindfulness practice, the experienced changes and benefits were attributed to practicing mindfulness regularly.

### **Theme 3: Transforming Schools**

Mindfulness training encouraged participants to trust their own professional insights, yet contextual differences were documented between the two sites in how educators related mindfulness to teaching and learning. Site 1 was engaged in a whole school mindfulness initiative with administrative and parent support, a supportive community of colleagues, and greater privilege. A former SMART in Education participant, Michelle at Site 1, observed her

peers taking the SMART training this fall, “People are coming in changed and different and leading their students in a refreshed way. And I think that whole idea of letting all the teachers know on the staff that the best intervention is them.” There was a sense of positive school change. Site 2 consisted of educators traveling from multiple schools within a large district who were experiencing greater work stress, more isolation, and less privilege. Here any changes noted were limited to the individual and these participants continued to struggle with work satisfaction.

Participants related mindfulness to their work with students and colleagues as well as paperwork and testing requirements. They viewed mindfulness as a catalyst for experiencing greater presence with students and colleagues and restoring balance to schools where standardized curriculum and testing dominated the landscape. Participants noted how mindfulness practice clarified their values and altered choices related to curriculum and instruction. At Site 1, there was significant discussion about the importance of developing social-emotional skills and focusing on whole child development. They related mindfulness to one of the district’s goals, social-emotional learning.

Those who began their careers close to 20 years ago spoke openly about how standards and testing mandates in the past decade had shifted focus away from social-emotional growth of the child. Ellen commented that the stress she faces as a teacher had shifted and was now more directly related to testing pressures in a heavily mandated, data-driven environment. She said, “It felt like we were wringing out every point in the test scores that we could with kids.” She commented, “I think anxiety levels were increasing and the fun was going out of it, so we weren’t helping kids grow into healthy human beings.” She continued to explain that mindfulness returns balance to the teaching and learning environment. She said, “I feel like we’re still able to have quality instruction that’s rigorous and really nurture [students].” Maisy wrote in her final reflection paper:

Education has changed a lot over the past decade since data and accountability have become such strong focal points. In the past, education was more child-centered. As a teacher, I was more reflective on each child, their needs and I used that information to help drive my instruction. Now, data and Common Core Standards drive the instruction. All students are expected to meet those standards at the same time and a failure of their ability to do so is reflective as a failure of their teacher. This subtle pressure of blaming the teacher has permeated the way I respond to stress and to my students. I get frustrated and agitated if a student continues to struggle and is not taking on my instruction. I carry that stress and frustration around with me, which causes me to be impatient, preoccupied, grumpy and overwhelmed. Logically, I know my job is about the child and not the data, but I know my data is being watched and judged by people who do not know my students.

The emphasis on standards-driven academic outcomes has added an additional layer of stress on already overwhelmed teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2001 as cited in Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Maisy emphasized how mindfulness practice helped her reconnect with a child-centered teaching philosophy, “This course has reignited my core beliefs about child-centered education and given me some tools to help diminish the stress that the ‘data-driven’ movement has created for both me and the students.” She explained how it has changed her interactions with students in the teaching and learning environment, “We laugh more, take more pause breaks, think and reflect before we respond, and really listen to others’ responses.” From our first interview in September to this final reflection paper written in November, Maisy transitioned from frustration about the current state of education to a more empowered position. Stephanie, initially doubtful

about the benefits of the schoolwide mindfulness goal, changed her opinion as the result of experiencing positive changes herself. In our final interview, she thought the school-wide mindfulness program for students would be beneficial and support social-emotional health.

By contrast, participants at Site 2 felt their efforts were isolated and did not influence greater school change. Their practice helped clarify their own ideas and how they interacted with students, although they believed that a larger school initiative and administrative commitment to mindfulness was needed to experience greater school change. Charlotte linked mindfulness with restorative justice, the school's approach to improve student behavior. In our first interview, she indicated frustration with this system and stated that she did not fully understand how restorative justice worked. In our final interview, she expressed that she thought training teachers and students in mindfulness would support the practice of true mindful listening and restorative justice. She stated:

I think it's making me a bigger believer in restorative justice and yet how do we build the capacity of kids to grow, as well? So, I think the next thing that I would like to look into, if I ever have any time to do that, is, alright, I get it. I know what it's about, it's listening to kids, I get it, but how do we really get kids to listen to kids? Because that's what restorative justice is and seeing the consequences of their actions. Are we *really* letting kids *really* listen to kids or are we just going through the process? Because if we don't have more people trained in mindfulness and in really paying attention to what you're feeling, then are we really having them listen to each other or are we just going through the motions?

Mollie shared taking deep breaths and a few mindful movements with a student and engaged in conversations about mindfulness with colleagues. She primarily used the practices to keep herself calm and effectively interact with others. Unlike participants at Site 1, however, she did not believe that the efforts of a small group of teachers would be enough to shift the teaching and learning environment in the schools where she worked. She thought that administrators should also complete the training and school district commitment was needed for real change to occur.

Systemic support and privilege allowed greater change in the school environment at Site 1 while lack of systemic support and less privilege restricted school change at Site 2. It is noted that participants at Site 2 collectively completed fewer independent mindfulness practice minutes than those at Site 1. Additionally, participants at Site 2 worked in different schools and had to drive long distances through traffic to attend training while those at Site 1 worked together in the same school and had colleagues also enrolled in the program as well as a supportive administrator.

Site 2 participants consistently referenced greater stress in their work life. They spoke about large class sizes, student behavior and learning challenges, less involved parents, and rapidly changing administration and curriculum. Mollie noted workload concerns, "In my work life, definitely, it's just too much. It's just too much. I don't even have time to teach." She linked excessive workload to her stress and teacher burnout. Stress is related to emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, often resulting in detachment from students and negative feelings about work (Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Teacher burnout is attributed to long-term professional stress, including emotional exhaustion, lack of autonomy, and disengagement (Maslach et al., 2001; McCarthy et al., 2009; Jennett, Harris & Mesibov, 2003 as cited in Trumbower, 2015). Mollie was not sure that she could make it to retirement and Ann commented that she was already experiencing burnout after three years of teaching. High teacher stress and burnout in the teaching profession often leads to teachers leaving the field prematurely (Flook et al., 2013;

Herrmann & Gallo; 2013). Participants at this site did not have the privileges of strong support systems and resources in their jobs nor did they work with a privileged student body. The district did help fund the training using grant money and offered professional development credit. This action was greatly appreciated by participants and supported their ability to attend.

As the only person of color in the study, Grace noted important considerations about the role of privilege as it relates to mindfulness. She stated, "I mean, culturally speaking, I think of this as a white people thing to do, and when I looked around the room that was validated every time." She also pointed out that although taking breaths might help to calm a person with small stressors, it may not work for more serious life issues. She explained that mindfulness assumes a certain amount of privilege. She stated, "I feel like in order to be in a place where you can use this there are certain privileges that you already have to have to even be in a place to be open to it." When I probed to better understand the specific privileges she meant, she answered:

I mean the fact that you can, first of all, even take a class to do those, which money was one of the reasons I didn't take it early on. Then to be in a space where your biggest problems are things that you can manage by deep breathing or doing body scans, where people have much bigger problems than that.

Although Site 2 educators valued what mindfulness could do to improve the teaching and learning environment, change was limited to individualistic efforts.

By comparison, Site 1 participants expressed they were not experiencing significant stress in their work life and had administrative support. Site 1 was a privileged community. The parent teacher association raised funds to help pay for the SMART in Education program at the school and teachers were able to walk down the hall to attend weekly sessions. They also were immersed in a school where many people had taken or were taking the training and could easily find others to practice or discuss mindfulness if they wished.

Participants at Site 1 shared examples to illustrate how mindfulness was already shifting the school environment. Maisy shared, "You know, we start off our staff meetings now in mindfulness; we do a mindful 10 minutes of mindful breathing as a staff now ... and everyone knows what to do. It's not weird. It's very comfortable." She explained, "It's just a more common phrase. It's just what people are starting to do more often." Ellen articulated how mindfulness was already creating change:

The kids need to know that they're respected. And there's something about taking time out and everybody participating in a common exercise that benefits child and adult alike. That's one angle. Another one is the general theme of kindness that is a part of mindfulness is vital and I think can help shift the culture of a school. And as a school, I would say that we are shifting. We have been shifting and this will hopefully continue the momentum away from kids being, more about valuing the kids' output on a test over who they are as people and what they can contribute to the world and how to take care of themselves. And I think the mindfulness that we're focusing on is an opportunity to grow to the next stage as a community, and a community that's kind and thinking beyond just the curriculum of content.

Stephanie explained, "I can already feel it," and, "That kids are acting out less. There's way more attention brought onto how can we be kind to ourselves and kind to others in the classroom. So that's been a great thing for me to observe, as someone who works with all grade levels."

Systemic support and greater privilege allowed for greater school change at Site 1 while at Site 2 change was individualistic. Since mindfulness was not prioritized in the Site 2 school district, it was left to individuals to take an interest and invest their time, a perceived limited

resource. Site 2 participants felt more isolated while trying to implement mindfulness practice in their lives. Privilege may play a role in mindfulness reaching educator audiences as well as supporting individuals to establish regular mindfulness practice.

### Discussion

The purpose of this study was to understand how K-12 educators make meaning of mindfulness and relate it to their professional work. The first theme revealed that similar conceptual understandings of mindfulness were identified: (a) present moment focus, (b) expanded awareness, and (c) a sense of neutrality or reduced judgement. Interestingly, these concepts align with how experienced practitioners describe mindfulness. Jon Kabat-Zinn describes mindfulness as “paying attention in a particular way: on purpose, in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994 as cited in Roeser et al., 2012, p. 169). Thich Nhat Hahn states, “Mindfulness is the energy of being aware and awake to the present moment” (Plum Village Mindfulness Practice Center, 2014). Mindfulness is the practice of intentionally focusing awareness on the present without judgment, coming into a state of neutral observation (McCown et al., 2010). Participants who practiced regularly during this study provided more in-depth explanations about these concepts, stated they were able to return attention to the present moment more often, experienced more extensive beneficial changes, and integrated mindfulness practice into daily life.

The second theme suggests improvements in relational quality. The study supports literature related to strengthened relationships, increased feelings of compassion, and reappraisal of a problem before responding (Burrows, 2011, 2013; Herrmann & Gallo, 2013; Sharp & Jennings, 2015; Trumbower, 2015). There were opportunities to pause, observe, and respond from a greater sense of calm, patience, and compassion. Evidence suggests that participants began to experience the first and second levels of mindfulness that involve moderating one’s behavior and becoming more consistently responsive (Yates, 2015). Participants discussed how expanding awareness, observation of details, and willingness to consider other perspectives strengthened responsiveness, compassion, and relationships.

These skills were experienced more frequently by participants who established a regular mindfulness practice. Participants who integrated mindfulness practices into their lives began to question and consider patterns of thought and behavior. Several participants expressed a sense of empowerment and reclaimed child-centered philosophies, shared examples of choosing new responses in their work environments, made efforts to listen and consider other perspectives, observed students and colleagues more closely, practiced self-compassion, and took steps to increase self-care. Self-care and community support allows educators to experience resilience and “capitalize on a mindfulness-based program” (Schussler et al., 2018, p. 22).

Nel Noddings (1992) advocates for ethics of care in schools to strengthen teaching and learning. Participants in this study felt mindfulness made them kinder and more caring teachers. When educators model relational skills in learning spaces, students and colleagues may experience a genuine and compassionate presence that supports social bonds. Mindfulness is thought to assist in the transformation of the mind to experience a sense of interconnection and compassion (Palmer & Zajonc, 2010; Yates, 2015; Zajonc, 2009). Attending to the relational quality of teaching and learning responds to Giroux’s (1997, 2015) suggestion that social bonds and collective reasoning are essential to a successful democratic community. Opportunities to align work with values and feel connection with others may be meaningful for educators. They perceived that mindfulness improved relationships and strengthened relationships may create a

support network important to educator resiliency. Stronger relationships could counter teacher stress in two ways: (a) creating a positive, proactive support network, and (b) reducing interpersonal conflict. Strengthening collegiality along with enhanced emotional regulation, awareness, and efficacy may strengthen resilience and create a protective factor that reduces teacher burnout (Schussler et al., 2018).

The literature links mindfulness to social emotional competency (Dottin, 2009; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Jennings et al., 2013; Sharp & Jennings, 2015). This study provides evidence that participants related mindfulness to social emotional skills, including reflecting in a nonjudgmental way, observing and gathering data, empathy, and compassion referred to by other authors. Some of these skills were specifically addressed in the SMART in Education curriculum while others were indirectly experienced.

Participants noted responding with compassion towards self and others. Strengthening compassion may buffer teacher stress and counteract teacher burnout (Sharp & Jennings, 2015). Additionally, compassion may play a significant role in healthy relationships and school communities. Scholar bell hooks (2000) noted, “compassion and forgiveness reconnect us” (p. 217). Finding new ways to increase compassion in teaching and learning environments is likely to improve relational quality in educational settings. As participants began to notice details in the present moment more keenly, they responded in ways that were kinder to establish trust. “Trustworthy spaces are fundamental to learning and allow real change to take place” (Casbon et al., 2005, p. 366).

Although participants believed mindfulness practice helped reduce stress, several found the benefits extended into all areas of their lives and well beyond stress management. One participant offered an insight that mindfulness is really about increasing awareness and becoming fully present. She stated that as her experience with mindfulness expanded, stress seemed almost insignificant as compared with greater awareness and presence. Improved professional and personal relationships were a significant focus of discussion in this study.

The final theme provided insights about individual and school change as well as contextual differences. Mindfulness training provided a new opportunity to experience connection and reflection. It provided space to pause, reflect, and feel validated and empowered. Interactions occurred laterally as opposed to what is generally experienced in traditional authoritarian structures. There was a sense of openness, mutual respect, trust, and freedom. Mindfulness training can create space for teacher empowerment, and empowered teachers are better able to reclaim child-centered philosophies and create relational spaces in schools.

An intensely standards-driven teaching and learning environment and excessive work demands were considered stressful for teachers in this study. Participants explained that extreme focus on testing had an unintended consequence of dehumanizing students and teachers. Participants, especially at Site 1, believed that social emotional health was the foundation for learning and they experienced a renewed commitment to this view. The American history of rationalization has created an educational reform culture that quantifies measurement to gauge success and downplays complex human interactions (Eisner, 2001, as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2013). Educational environments influenced by neoliberal forces devalue teacher decision-making, emphasize efficiency and output as opposed to process, intensify work, and isolate educators (Apple, 2004, as cited in Flinders & Thornton, 2013; Giroux, 2015; Slouka, 2009). Teachers who might otherwise respond to students as individuals and assume empowered roles are too often forced into unrealistic demands that result in loss of power. In such systems, the focus becomes on efficiency of time and work productivity at the expense of personal and

social growth. The intensification of teacher work escalates chronic work overload resulting in little time for conversation or reflection (Apple, 2004 in Flinders & Thornton, 2013). These factors contribute to the daily stress encountered by educators. Mindfulness training as professional development presents an opportunity for teachers to reconnect with themselves and with others in ways that counter the hectic climate in which they normally work. It also may increase a sense of connection and empowerment.

Contextual differences at the two sites, including perceived work stress, support, isolation, and privilege influenced participant experience with mindfulness. Systemic support and privilege influenced the degree to which participants experienced change in their schools, and incongruence persisted between mindfulness and the current educational structure. This study suggests that systemic support and privilege may influence how individuals and schools integrate mindfulness. Additional research to explore these factors in greater depth is recommended.

### **Limitations**

There are several limitations of this study. Analysis of data in case study research focuses on the complexity of the case rather than generalization to other contexts (Creswell, 2006). Limitations of this study include the demographics of the participants, time frame, and settings specific to the study. The findings do not explore if participants continued mindfulness practice beyond the scope of this time frame nor does it reflect experiences at other SMART in Education sites. These might be appropriate subjects for future research. There may exist differences between self-reported perceptions and actual participant behavior (Singer, 2014). Mindfulness practice logs were self-reported and may or may not represent exact mindfulness practice time completed by each participant. Adding classroom observations to a future study could better capture if observable changes took place in the teaching and learning setting.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

The mindfulness in education community is currently establishing foundational knowledge to better understand how contemplative epistemology might influence the teaching profession. This study identifies how K-12 educators made meaning of mindfulness and how they related it to professional work. Despite individual and contextual differences, shared understandings about mindfulness existed. These included: (a) present moment focus, (b) expanded awareness, and (c) a sense of neutrality or reduced judgement. Educators who integrated mindfulness practices into daily life were able to explain and experience these concepts in greater depth. Participants related these concepts to improved relationships, greater present-moment awareness, compassion, and the ability to make healthier and more empowered choices. Participants who did not practice regularly did not experience these same changes even though they enjoyed the training and thought it was worthwhile.

It is recommended that mindfulness training for teachers include multiple supports to help participants establish regular mindfulness practice. In particular, participants found that short, guided audio practices were helpful. They also appreciated the diverse mindfulness practices that were introduced so that they could select which practices worked best for them. Participants found the half-day retreat with multiple mindfulness practices to be impactful because they experienced mindfulness for a longer period and felt calmer and more relaxed for several hours following.

Participants provided many examples of how they utilized mindfulness in their professional lives. Those who practiced consistently and frequently communicated that mindfulness practice positively influenced both personal and professional life and described a holistic change. This change involved longer periods of time spent in the present moment and greater awareness that allowed room for new and often healthier, compassionate responses. Participants emphasized that although mindfulness was a helpful stress reduction tool, it offered much more and supported expanded awareness, relational quality, and sense of well-being.

However, differences were discovered between the two sites. More of the educators at Site 1 with greater systemic supports and privilege were able to commit to regular practice. Examining systems of support and the role of privilege in various school settings will deepen our understanding of contextual differences. This study suggests that educators enrolled in a mindfulness-based intervention and simultaneously working in K-12 environment may benefit from administrative support, a connected community of peers also learning and practicing mindfulness, attention to diversity, and reduction of barriers, such as financial commitment, location, and excessive workload to allow time to attend. It is recommended that program designers and school districts consider the role of systemic support and privilege to best support educator participation in such programs. Future research might explore individual motivations and attitudes related to attendance as well as individual and systemic factors involved in establishing regular practice.

Educators experienced improved relational quality during the SMART in Education program. Additionally, this study revealed that several participants experienced a greater sense of empowerment and new ways to interact with colleagues and students. Site 1 participants felt that creating a mindfulness culture at their school was transforming the teaching and learning environment. They observed that teachers were more focused on being present with students, strengthened commitment to social-emotional learning, and responded in more patient and compassionate ways. Although Participants at Site 2 did not experience a similar shift in their school environments, they did believe that mindful presence positively influenced their interactions with others.

Studies that investigate schools that have integrated mindfulness practices into the school culture could inform potential connections between individual and school change. Additional ethnographies, narrative inquiries, and case studies that explore contextual differences in mindfulness-based interventions for educators are needed. Studies that follow educators after mindfulness training has concluded will be important to learn to what extent mindfulness practice continues post-training.

Future research that investigates mindfulness as it relates to relational quality, educator empowerment, and school change will add depth to the literature. This study highlights that although mindfulness may be successful in reducing teacher stress and strengthening social emotional competency, it is also important to attend to contextual sources of stress, teacher empowerment, and systemic support. This shift in focus will help avoid the potential co-opting of mindfulness and empower educators to better address the core issues in schools that impact student learning and teacher work. Mindfulness as professional development may create opportunities for individual and school change by quietly countering systems of oppression.

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