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**THE INFLUENCE OF MINDFULNESS ON TEACHER-STUDENT  
RELATIONSHIPS, CLASSROOM CLIMATE, AND SCHOOL CULTURE:  
SECONDARY EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES**

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

to the faculty of the

DEPARTMENT OF ADMINISTRATIVE AND INSTRUCTIONAL LEADERSHIP

of

THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

at

ST. JOHN'S UNIVERSITY

New York

by

Margaret Lane Dunne

Date Submitted: March 23, 2020

Date Approved: March 23, 2020

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Margaret L. Dunne

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Dr. Elizabeth Gil

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **THE INFLUENCE OF MINDFULNESS ON TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS, CLASSROOM CLIMATE, AND SCHOOL CULTURE: SECONDARY EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES**

Margaret L. Dunne

Research suggests that the relationships students share with teachers have the power to enhance or hinder students' learning and overall well-being. Thus, there is a critical need for educational leaders to implement systems that develop teachers' abilities to connect with and positively support students. The focus of this phenomenological study was to explore a purposefully selected group of participants' perceptions of how their mindfulness practices influence their work as secondary educators. Participants of the study included secondary educators from varied academic departments, varied years of teaching experience, and varied years engaged in mindfulness practice. Participants were drawn from two suburban, mid-sized secondary schools in the Northeastern region of the U.S. Both districts featured in the study can be characterized as high performing; consequently, students in these districts may endure significant pressure to succeed and face fierce competition for grades, placement in high-level courses, and, ultimately, admission to "top-tier" colleges and universities. In these high-stakes settings, the need for teacher support is perhaps even more critical to learning outcomes and overall student welfare.

Data collection points in this study included in-depth critical incident reports, phenomenological interviews, and a culminating focus group. The data were gathered, coded, analyzed, and interpreted in alignment with three research questions:

1. How do secondary educators perceive the origins of their mindfulness practices?
2. How do secondary educators perceive the connection between their contemporary mindfulness practice and their critical role as a secondary teacher?
3. What do secondary teachers perceive is the influence of mindfulness on school culture, and what barriers do they perceive in establishing mindful schools?

Understanding the influence of teacher mindfulness on teacher-student relationships, classroom climate, and school culture may have important implications for the realm of secondary education. Findings may inform educational leaders' decisions regarding organizational change initiatives, including teacher preparation programs and district and school-wide teacher support plans.

*Keywords:* Mindfulness, mindfulness intervention, teacher-student relationships, teacher presence, phenomenology, multi-case study, secondary teachers.

## DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my family. To my husband, Phil-- your encouragement, love, and willingness to carry our family responsibilities when I was in class or working in the library made this project possible. To my three children, Philip, Maleigh, and Deirdre-- it is an understatement to say that I would not have had the confidence or time to complete this journey without your love and support. Thank you to my husband and children for working as a team to help me accomplish this life-long dream. I love you.

To my parents, who approach each day with openness and curiosity, you continue to inspire me.

And finally, my gratitude to my co-teacher, Bridget. Thank you for your endless encouragement and insight over the past few years. You model what it means to be a connected, present, and loving teacher!

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to express gratitude to my mentor and my teacher, Dr. Elizabeth Gil, for introducing me to qualitative research, showing me the power of narrative inquiry, and assisting me as I conducted my study and prepared my findings. I appreciate your thoughtful and honest comments along the way. To Dr. Randall Clemens, thank you for sharing your knowledge of phenomenology as I worked through the various phases of my research. Your detailed feedback was invaluable. To Dr. Mary Ellen Freeley, thank you for leading my cohort from day one and serving on my defense committee.

I also would like to thank the nine teachers who selflessly set aside the time to openly and honestly share their stories; you put into words what it means to be a mindful teacher. Your voices are the heart of this study.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

A 2019 Pew Research survey revealed that 70% of all U.S. students aged 13-19 see mental health as an important issue for their age group, even when they are not personally experiencing a mental health issue or challenge (Horowitz & Graf, 2019). Recent data suggest that these numbers may be even higher for students in high-performing districts. *The Washington Post* reported on a National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine's 2019 study which showed students in high-achieving districts have increased levels of mental health issues when compared with other U.S. teens; this study specifically "added youths in 'high achieving schools' to their list of 'at-risk' groups, along with kids living in poverty and foster care, recent immigrants and those with incarcerated parents" (Wallace, 2019). Moreover, according to the Pew Research (2019), 61% of middle and high school students experience substantial pressure to earn high grades; in contrast, fewer than 30% of teens report feeling social pressures or pressure about their external appearance (Horowitz & Graf, 2019). The data spotlight several important issues facing middle school and high school teachers and their students.

In the secondary school setting, the threat of gun violence, increasingly more rigorous curriculum, and an over emphasis on high-stakes test results are likely adding to the stressors that American students face. As a result, teachers across the nation, and specifically in high-performing districts, are opening their classroom door to students who may feel overwhelmed or even depressed by the school day that lays ahead, which may have significant repercussions for teaching and learning outcomes. For teachers to

effectively teach and students to successfully learn, secondary educators need specific strategies for tuning into and adequately meeting not only their students' academic demands but also their emotional needs.

While academic knowledge is important for teachers, students' success depends on more than their teachers' curricular and pedagogical expertise. According to Andy Hargreaves (1998), for teachers, it "isn't just a matter of knowing your subject, being efficient, having the correct competences, or learning all the right techniques. Good teachers aren't just well-oiled machines" (p.270). Research suggests that despite the challenges facing teachers and students, "by creating an environment that encourages feelings of belonging and support, teachers can simultaneously meet the academic and social needs of students" (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004, p. 49). Positive teacher-student daily interactions also matter when it comes to students' academic growth and emotional well-being (Fredriksen & Rhodes, 2004).

It seems that the teacher-student connection plays a major role in establishing classroom environments that are not only primed for student learning but also filled with emotional safety for students. Yet, day by day, the secondary school environment is growing more complicated, and teaching is becoming an increasingly complex and stressful profession (Abenavoli, Jennings, Greenberg, Harris & Katz, 2013). In today's school environments, teachers must face these challenges head-on yet still "maintain composure" and respond to "the various needs of students, parents, and administrators" (Frank, Jennings, & Greenberg, 2015, p. 156). Now more than ever, to adequately prepare and support secondary educators, teaching should be thought of as "an emotional practice" that "involves and depends upon extensive degrees of *emotional*

*understanding*” (Hargreaves, 1998, p. 838): an understanding of both the teachers’ emotional states and the constantly shifting feelings and thoughts of their students.

Throughout the school day, teachers are continuously called upon to take notice of, process, and then respond or not respond to what their students say and how their students behave. Often, they must rely on their intuition to determine how to handle an unfolding situation; e.g. whether to remove an upset or disruptive student from class or resist taking action and carry on with the lesson. When teachers can attend to their own thoughts and recognize their physiological responses to situations, they have a better opportunity to pause and choose an appropriate response to students’ language and behaviors. Often, this means that a teacher remains calm and composed, rather than becoming reactive and distracted. When teachers are present to their own feelings and internal thoughts, they are more able to check in on their students and ensure that they are learning.

To skillfully read an unfolding situation and respond in an appropriate and meaningful way, teachers may need additional strategies that strengthen their capacity to be present, clear-minded, and understanding of their students. Supporting teachers, students, and the relationship between them is where mindful awareness and its practice come into play. *Mindfulness practice*, in its more secular definition, is “the awareness that emerges from paying attention on purpose, in the present moment, and non-judgmentally to the unfolding of experience moment-by-moment” (Kabat-Zinn, 2003, p. 145). It also has been conceptualized as responding to negative emotions with a sense of “curiosity, openness, and acceptance” (Bishop et. al., 2004, p. 232). These separate but complementary definitions indicate that mindfulness can be something experienced

within the practitioner (e.g., an awareness), as well as something that is expressed (e.g., a calm or flexible response). Not surprisingly, mindful awareness has been shown to aid teachers in meeting their students' needs because of its influence on both a practitioner's "intrapersonal mindfulness," e.g., self-awareness, and their "interpersonal mindfulness," e.g., relationships with others (Frank, Jennings, & Greenberg, 2015, p. 155). Teacher mindful awareness, including both the intrapersonal and interpersonal components, and its influence on secondary students' emotional, social, and academic development is the subject of this study.

### **Purpose of the Study**

Research suggests that teacher mindful awareness may have important benefits for teachers and for students. With mindful awareness, teachers "may be more attentive and responsive to the academic, social, and emotional needs of individual students" while also effectively reading the "dynamics" of the collective classroom (Abenavoli et al., 2013, p. 58). Additionally, research suggests that mindful teachers "may more easily monitor" student learning and, as a result, more "flexibly adapt their instructional approach" to individual students (Abenavoli et. al., 2013, p. 58). Lastly, mindful teachers may have an increased capacity to notice and shift their own thinking and emotional state. This may lead to a "greater regulation of their automatic reactions to student misbehavior" and fewer "reactive, punitive practices in favor of more intentional, constructive practices" (Abenavoli et al., 2013, p. 58).

By collecting, analyzing, and interpreting teacher narratives and anecdotes, this researcher aimed to better understand the phenomenon of mindfulness in secondary education. Specifically, the researcher was curious to know if and to what extent a select

group of participants perceive their mindful awareness showing through in their interactions with students and in the overall climate of their classrooms. Additionally, the researcher endeavored to understand their perceptions of any impetus for adopting mindfulness at the secondary school level and any potential obstacles in doing so.

### **Theoretical Frameworks**

At its core, this phenomenological inquiry is about secondary teachers' perceptions of two types of relationships: the association the participants make between their mindfulness practices and their professional role, and the relationship between teachers and their students. Thus, Urie Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological Systems* theory (1977) was an appropriate umbrella theoretical framework.

According to Bronfenbrenner, "the understanding of human development demands going beyond the direct observation of behavior;" therefore, it should not be "limited to a single setting and must take into account aspects of the environment beyond the immediate situation containing the subject" (p. 514). Because of their daily interactions with each other, teachers and students are critical aspects of each other's "microsystems," what Bronfenbrenner defines as the most "immediate" environment (p. 514). The student also develops within a larger nest, one which encompasses the school and its culture. Teachers also are embedded within a nested system that is shaped by interactions with students, moment-to-moment classroom events, and the overall philosophy or "feel" of the building in which he or she teaches. Consequently, improving teaching and learning outcomes requires understanding how these environments influence each other.



Specifically, the researcher conceptualizes teacher mindfulness influencing students through multiple nests. First, when teachers directly teach mindfulness to their students, such as when the teacher guides students through collective breathing or engages the class in reflective journaling or meditation, the mindfulness practice becomes part of the student's microsystem, and the student's experience engaging in the mindfulness activity may directly affect the student. However, even when there is no formal practice or acknowledgement of mindfulness in the classroom, a teachers' mindful presence may also impact the student. Viewed through Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory, the teacher's mindfulness practice has potential to influence the student via the student's *exosystem*, defined as the "specific social structures, both formal and informal, that do not themselves contain the developing person but impinge upon or encompass the immediate settings in which that person is found, and thereby influence, delimit, or even determine what goes on there (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, p. 515). These are the environmental elements with which the child is not directly involved but which still may hold influence over the developing child (e.g. the impact of a parent's health issue on a child, or, in the current study, a teacher's meditation practice outside of the school day). Furthermore, even when students select not to participate in the mindfulness activity, they may still be impacted by the practice of other students in the classroom. For example, the student benefits from the quieter tone or more focused energy in the room.

To further explore Bronfenbrenner's idea of the interconnected systems in a school setting, the researcher collected and viewed data through the lens of *Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB)* theory. Similar and complementary to Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory, IPNB (Siegel, 2012) also suggests that human beings continuously

influence and are influenced by other people and their environments. Daniel J. Siegel, M.D., credited with developing the field of IPNB, posits that “the human mind is an embodied and relational process that regulates the flow of energy and information within the brain and between brain” (Siegel, 2012, p. 2). IPNB is a complex field which attempts to join research from many disciplines; most of the core aspects of IPNB are well beyond the scope of the current study. However, Siegel’s conception of relationship as the “flow of energy” informs the researcher’s understanding of the influence of teacher mindful awareness on a teacher’s presence and on the teacher’s interactions with students. In short, Bronfenbrenner’s theory allowed the researcher to understand why the student is influenced by the teacher through the student’s microsystem and exosystem. IPNB also supported the researcher’s understanding of, perhaps, how that influence is occurring, via the impact of mindfulness practice on teacher presence and teacher-student interactions.

To more fully understand how mindfulness practice influences teacher presence, defined in the section below, the researcher developed a conceptual construct that draws from both bioecological and interpersonal neurobiological theories. The researcher presents this conceptual framework, The Mindfulness Loop, in the subsequent chapters.

### **Overview of Related Literature**

A review of related research reveals that when teachers implement mindfulness into their teaching role, not only do they obtain personal benefits, such as reduced stress (Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, and Davidson, 2013), but their students also reap benefits. Teachers’ mindful awareness has been linked to “positive dyadic relationships between teachers and students” because it equips “teachers with the attentional and emotional resources and regulatory control they require to create and maintain

emotionally supportive classroom climates in which all students can learn” (Roeser, Skinner, Beers, & Jennings, 2012, p. 170). Mindfulness, it seems, has been shown to boost a person’s capacity for awareness of and empathy toward others (Roeser et al., 2013), and this tuning into emotional needs provides teachers with an increased ability to engage in more caring and supportive relationships (Weare, 2014). Supporting students requires that a teacher “keep[s] in touch with one’s own and the students’ thoughts, behaviour and emotional reactions, and respond[s] appropriately” (Weare, 2014, p. 14). This research will further investigate how mindfulness is experienced by secondary educators and subsequently expressed in their interactions with students and the climate of their classrooms, which may, ultimately, influence the overall culture of a school.

### **Significance of Study**

Considering increasing teenage anxiety and depression, it has never been more important for teachers to build warm and supportive relationships with students. Existing research suggests that mindfulness may develop the teacher attributes that allow these strong connections to occur. The benefits of mindfulness for teachers and their students has yet to be fully examined. Up to this point, much of the research on teacher mindfulness has focused on the ability for mindfulness practice to decrease teacher stress and help teachers cope with professional burnout (Abenavoli et al., 2013; Jennings & Greenberg, 2009; Flook et al., 2013; Roeser et al., 2013). Indeed, the research findings of these studies have clear implications for the current study of secondary teachers in high-performing districts where students and teachers may be experiencing heightened levels of stress and anxiety. Additionally, the present study will add to this discussion by providing secondary teacher narrative accounts of the specific stressors they experience,

such as balancing personal and professional responsibilities, and anecdotes about how they cope. Few studies have investigated how mindfulness increases teacher presence, in general, and cultivates the calm, non-reactive, and non-judgmental interactions that serve as the foundation for students' academic and emotional growth. This phenomenological study attempts to bridge at least some of the research gaps by exploring secondary teachers' perceptions of how mindfulness practice shapes teacher thinking and behavior and influences teacher interactions with students, classroom environment, and the overall culture of their school.

### **Research Questions**

The current study will examine three questions:

1. How do secondary educators perceive the origins of their mindfulness practices?
2. How do secondary educators perceive the connection between their contemporary mindfulness practice and their critical role as a secondary teacher?
3. What do secondary teachers perceive is the influence of mindfulness on school culture, and what barriers do they perceive in establishing mindful schools?

### **Definition of Terms**

*mindfulness*: In the existing literature and in this study, mindfulness has been defined as both an internal state and/or as a technique or strategy for creating a state of mindful awareness. Bishop et al. (2004) define mindfulness as having two-facets: "The first component involves the self-regulation of attention so that it is maintained on immediate experience" and "the second component involves adopting a particular orientation toward one's experiences in the present moment, an orientation that is characterized by curiosity, openness, and acceptance" (p. 232).

*mindfulness practice*: For the purposes of this study, a participant's mindfulness practice can be viewed as a formal or informal practice. A formal practice is operationalized as a technique or strategy for increasing mindful awareness. In this study, the researcher defines an informal mindfulness practice as an "orientation to experience that is adopted and cultivated in mindfulness meditation practices" (Bishop et al., 2004, p. 232).

*Three Axiom Mindfulness Model*: The definitional model includes three axioms: "Intention, Attention and Attitude" (Shapiro, 2006, p. 374). Intention involves paying attention on purpose; attention is awareness of what is happening in the moment; and attitude involves how an individual pays attention to what is happening at the moment (Shapiro et al., 2016).

*secondary educator*: a classroom teacher, administrator, or support staff who directly interacts with students in grades 7-12, such as a classroom teacher, guidance counselor or a school psychologist.

*presence*: a state of "awareness, receptivity, and connectedness to the mental, emotional, and physical workings of both the individual and the group in the context of their learning environments, and the ability to respond with a considered and compassionate best next step" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 266).

*attunement*: the focus on the mind of another person that harnesses the neural circuitry that "enables two people to 'feel felt' by each other" (Siegel, 2007, p.1).

*adverse childhood experiences (ACEs)*: childhood experiences of physical, sexual, and psychological abuse; household members who were substance abusers, mentally ill, suicidal, or imprisoned; violence against mother (Crandall et al., 2019).

*counter-ACEs*: positive childhood experiences that serve as a protective barrier between negative childhood experiences and later negative outcomes (Crandall et al., 2019).

*microsystem*: the child's most immediate environment which includes the child's setting and the individuals and groups with whom the child directly interacts (Noffsinger, Pfefferbaum, Pfefferbaum & Norris, 2012)

*exosystem*: the environments "in which the child does not have an active role" but which indirectly impacts the child's development nonetheless "by acting on the child's microsystem" (Noffsinger et al., 2012, para. 9). For the purposes of this study, the teacher's mindfulness practice may exist in the child's exosystem. For example, whether the teacher is directly engaging the class in mindfulness practice, such as through breathing or meditating, the teacher's mindful awareness may still affect the child.

### **Conclusion**

Significant research has been conducted on appropriate measures secondary educators might take to combat increasing levels of student stress and anxiety, as well as professional stress and burnout occurring in 21st-century learning environments. Mindfulness training has been identified as a strategy that teachers might employ. The current study extends this literature by sharing the individual and collective perspectives of a group of secondary teachers as to the role mindfulness practice plays in managing the challenges of their professional role, particularly in their high-performing secondary school environments. This study also adds to the conversation by exploring additional potential benefits of mindfulness, specifically how teacher mindfulness practice may positively influence secondary teachers' interactions with students, their classroom climates, and the overall culture of a school.

## Chapter 2

### Overview of Related Research

To inform this phenomenological study, literature was continuously reviewed as themes emerged from the data (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). This chapter includes a discussion of the theoretical/conceptual frameworks followed by five additional themes:

- adolescent mental health
- the critical role of the secondary teacher in supporting students and providing supportive environments
- the broad range of mindfulness definitions
- mindfulness in organizations
- mindfulness in secondary education

### Theoretical/ Conceptual Frameworks

To select appropriate theories for the current study, two major areas of critical literature were reviewed: mindfulness and behavioral theory/relational neuroscience. A review of mindfulness literature provided an understanding of outcomes associated with mindful awareness and practice. To further understand the complex phenomenon of how mindfulness practice influences teacher presence and teacher interactions with students, behavioral theory/relational neuroscience was also reviewed.

One of the challenges in exploring the influence of mindfulness was finding a common definition of the phenomenon. Thus, the researcher determined that to discover the essence of teacher mindfulness practice, it was crucially important to create some parameters for the term *mindfulness*. To more fully understand participants' experience of their mindfulness practice, the researcher used Shapiro's 3 Axiom model of "intention,

attention and attitude” (Shapiro et. al, 2016). The researcher hoped that viewing the data through this delimiting lens would allow her to better recognize attributes of mindfulness and to discern underlying patterns within the teachers’ narratives.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory was a natural theoretical starting place, since teachers and students frequently interact within the same environments, to use Bronfenbrenner’s terminology, within the same nest. With Bronfenbrenner as the foundational theorist, the researcher sought to layer in additional theories which might provide further insight into the topic under study, namely, how a teacher’s state of mind comes to influence the students within a particular classroom environment.

As the researcher extensively read about the development of teacher-student relationships and their effect on students’ development, she came across numerous references to the concept of teacher presence. The researcher began to wonder: What does it mean for a teacher to be present to a student? How does this presence influence students? How is teacher presence created? These inquiries led the researcher to Siegel’s concept of Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB), a theoretical field that considers, among other things, the neurobiological impact individuals have on each other.

As the teacher participants began to share their perceptions, interpersonal neurobiology became even more central to the study’s design and research methods. The researcher combined literature on mindfulness research, knowledge of Ecological Systems theory and IPNB theory, and her own experience and insights as a secondary teacher to add to the conceptual framework. The separate frameworks are explained in detail in the following section. The section concludes with the researcher’s conception of



how Ecological Systems and IPNB theories come together in a conceptual framework:  
The Mindfulness Loop.

### ***Ecology of Human Development***

At its core, Urie Bronfenbrenner's model of the ecology of human development (1998) addresses how relationships are formed. Bronfenbrenner recognized that rather than progressing in isolation, humans grow in relation to their family and home, school, community, and the greater society. The experiences that a child has with the people or objects in these settings are "the primary engines of human development" (Bronfenbrenner, 1998, p. 996). As illustrated in Figure 1, Bronfenbrenner identified four types of "nested systems" in his original ecology of human development: the microsystem, the mesosystem, the exosystem and the macrosystem. According to Ecological Systems theory, there are directional influences within and between each system.

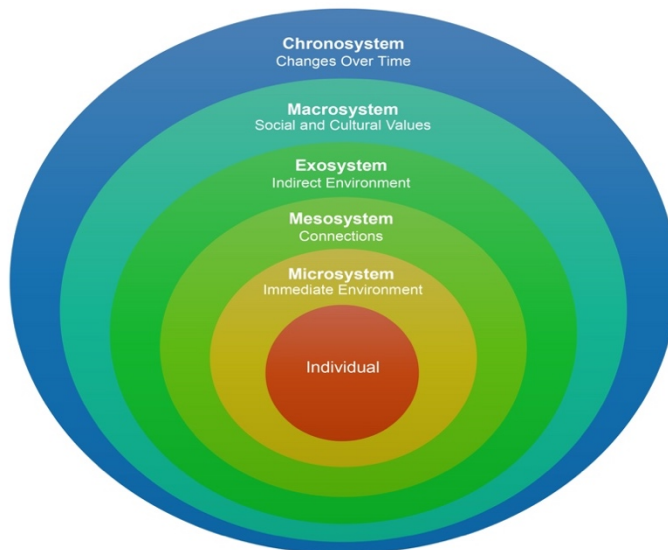


Figure 1. *Bronfenbrenner's Ecology of Human Development* (1997)

Bronfenbrenner's model includes systems that can powerfully mold development, as can the interaction of factors across systems. The model helps to explain the ecology of child development, which "takes place through processes of progressively more complex interaction between an active child and the persons, objects, and symbols in its immediate environment" (p. 996). Bronfenbrenner's framework of nests is relevant to the discussion of teacher-student relationships, since a secondary educator's relationship with students occurs within a complex environment and "on a fairly regular basis over extended periods of time" (p. 996). The teacher-student relationship is indeed a microsystem that greatly influences the development of the student: educators and students explore, exchange, and bring together personal knowledge, beliefs and understandings of their environments.

### ***Interpersonal Neurobiology (IPNB)***

Siegel (2007) states that mindful presence may help to cultivate and maintain strong relationships. In other words, the heart of presence is embracing the moment as a fresh experience without over-analyzing what is happening or overlaying the present situation with past experiences. Siegel's conception of attunement (2007) is helpful to understand how teacher presence influences students. Simply put, when two or more people communicate, whether verbally or nonverbally, particular neurons fire simultaneously. These mirror neurons are akin to "antennae that pickup information about the intentions and feelings of others" (Siegel, 2010, p. 224). Essentially, the individuals become connected at the neurobiological level as the mirror neurons are a "hardwired system designed for us to see the mind state of another person" (Siegel, 2010,

p. 224). Ultimately, mirror neurons encourage “behavioral imitation” which connects our own internal state to the internal state of those people in our presence, often “without conscious effort or intention” (Siegel, 2010, p. 224).

Researchers have discovered that mirror neurons start working at birth and continue to play a role during adolescence. In several studies, researchers discovered that the same area of the brain was activated in an observer as the neurons of an individual who was engaged with an activity (Roaten & Roaten, 2012). Specifically, this suggests that adolescents may “experience” other people’s feelings, whether that emotion is positive or negative, and thus they may “develop the ability to empathize with a friend who fails a test or is rejected by his girlfriend” (Roaten & Roaten, 2012, p.8-9). This finding has implications for classroom relationships, since it suggests that students not only are affected by the internal state of their classmates, but they may also be influenced by the emotional state of their teacher. Figure 2 (adapted from a stock image, All the world in her brain, ©Vs1489) suggests the mechanism of neuroning.

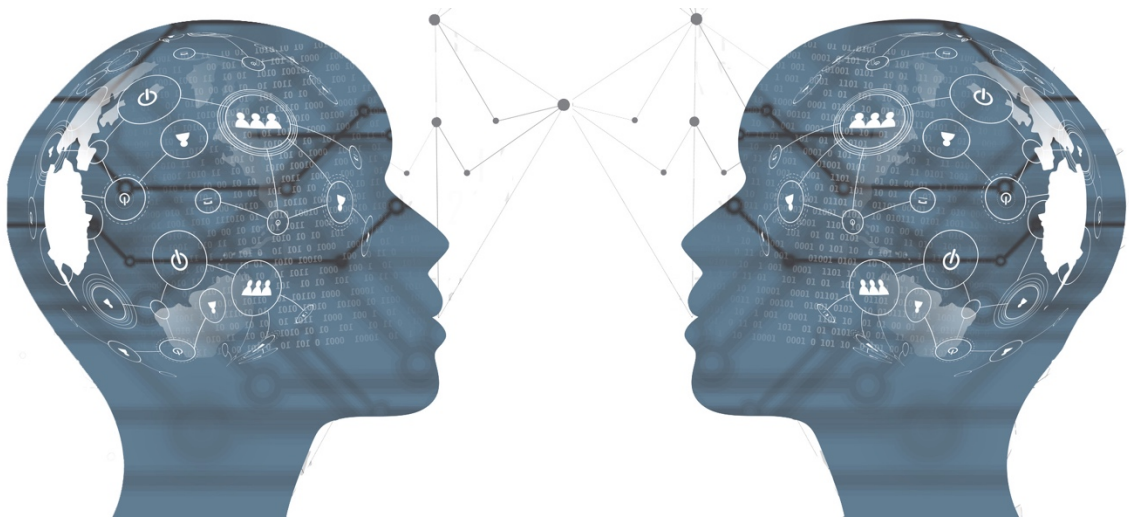


Figure 2. *Representation of Mirror Neuron*

### **Application of Theoretical Frameworks**

The participants' perceptions of how resonance and attunement occur, and their influence on relationships with students and the classroom environment is significant to the current study's exploration of mindfulness. During each and every interaction, teachers and students are continuously cued to respond in a particular way, since a teacher's verbal and non-verbal language may directly influence how a student responds to the teacher as well as the teacher's follow-up response. In essence, the teacher shapes the student, and the student shapes the teacher. For example, if a teacher expresses his or her anger, frustration, fear or disappointment toward a student, the student will often respond with anger, defensiveness, self-doubt, and shame. In the same way, a teacher's supportive, nurturing interactions with students likely create a calm classroom in which students feel capable of learning and also feel cared for by their peers and by their teachers. The tone of these interactions, whether positive or negative, chaotic or calm, nurturing or punitive, creates the energy that is circulated in the classroom and impacts the quality of the information flow. In the following section, the researcher presents a conceptual model of the intersection of IPNB and Ecological Systems theory: The Mindfulness Loop.

### **Conceptual Framework: The Mindfulness Loop**

In this figure, the researcher represents her perception of how two theories that underpin the current study, Interpersonal Neurobiology and the Ecological Systems theory, come together to explore teacher mindfulness.

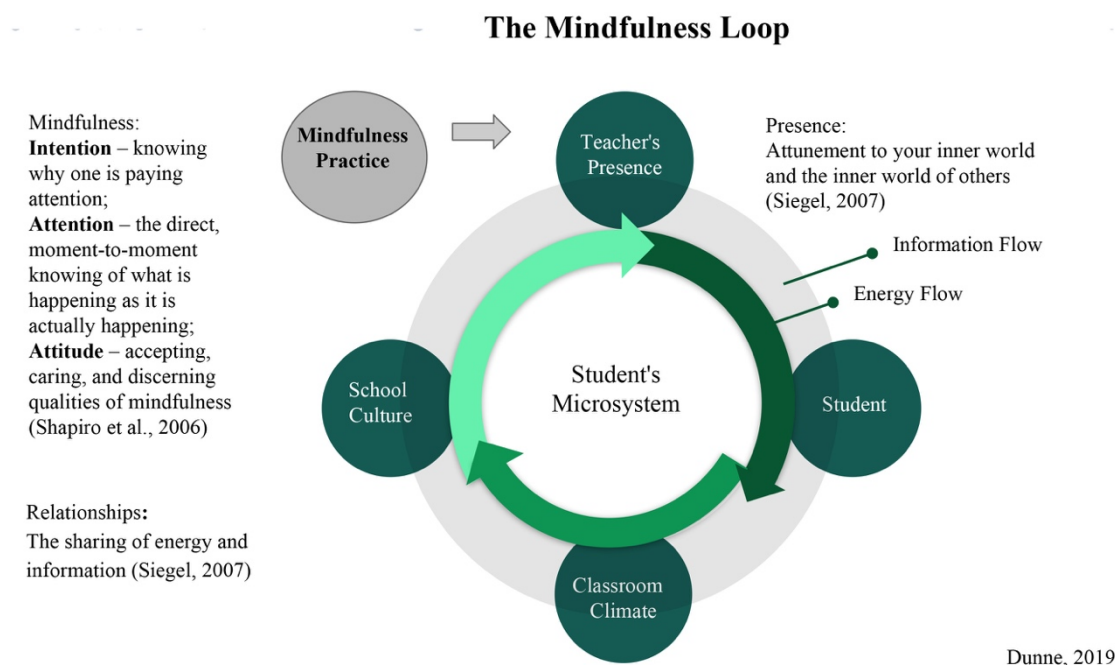


Figure 3. *Mindfulness Loop*

## Review of Related Research

The review of related research provides an overview of adolescent mental health; the critical role of the secondary teacher in supporting students and providing supportive environments; mindfulness definitions; mindfulness in organizations; and mindfulness in secondary education.

### *Increasing Incidences of Mental Health Issues Among Adolescents*

Given the data, adolescent mental health issues are significantly changing the roles and responsibilities of the secondary teacher. As is suggested by the extant literature presented in this chapter and in chapter 1, specific demographics of students face increased risk factors for debilitating stress, anxiety, and depressive symptoms. Because of their daily interactions, secondary teachers are positioned to support adolescent students, but they need evidence-based strategies to successfully do so.

First, adolescent mental health disorders are increasing. The World Health Organization (2019) provides important information about the causes of illness and disability among adolescents aged 15-19 (World Health Organization, 2019). According to their 2019 Adolescent Mental Health Fact Sheet, for adolescents, depression is the fourth leading cause and anxiety is the ninth leading cause of illness and disability worldwide (World Health Organization, 2019). According to research from the American Psychological Association (2019), “the rate of individuals reporting symptoms consistent with major depression in the last 12 months increased 52 percent in adolescents from 2005 to 2017 (from 8.7 percent to 13.2 percent)” (American Psychological Association, 2019). In addition, “the rate of young adults with suicidal thoughts or other suicide-related outcomes increased 47 percent from 2008 to 2017 (from 7.0 percent to 10.3 percent)” (American Psychological Association, 2019).

Trauma can also have a significant impact on adolescents’ mental health. The Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), an agency within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides essential data on the prevalence of childhood trauma and its impact on adolescent students. According to SAMHSA, more than two thirds of children reported at least one traumatic event by age 16, which may include “neglect or psychological, physical, or sexual abuse; community or school violence; witnessing or experiencing domestic violence; national disasters or terrorism; commercial sexual exploitation; sudden or violent loss of a loved one; refugee or war experiences; military family-related stressors (e.g., deployment, parental loss or injury); and/or serious accidents or life-threatening illness” (SAMHSA, 2015, par. 1). Related findings include a 1998 survey that collected data on individuals who have

endured Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACEs) to determine the “long-term impact of abuse and household dysfunction during childhood” on “health risk behavior and disease in adulthood” (Felitti et al., 1998, pp. 245-246). For secondary students, childhood trauma often leads to depression, the onset of eating disorders or self-harming behaviors, alcohol or drug abuse, and/or involvement in “risky” sexual behavior (SAMHSA, 2015, par. 5). However, research also suggests that ACE risk factors may be mitigated by supportive adults.

A recent study conducted by Crandall et al. (2019) investigated the protective effects of positive relationships on children. Specifically, the researchers examined whether counter-ACEs, meaning positive childhood experiences, are associated with later positive outcomes (Crandall et al., 2019). Results indicated “regardless of the number of ACEs, counter-ACEs protect against poor health and promote better health and wellbeing throughout adulthood” (Crandall et al., 2019). It seems that counter-ACEs protect children from adulthood depression, heightened stress, and disordered sleep (Crandall et al., 2019). Furthermore, research suggests that even adolescents who are not experiencing a mental issue benefit from positive relationships with teachers (Hamre & Pianta, 2006).

### ***The Secondary Teacher’s Role in Providing a Supportive Environment***

John Hattie’s work on teacher excellence (2003) posits that if improving student learning outcomes is the objective, resources should be directed at developing teachers. Hattie argues:

We have poured more money into school buildings, school structures, we hear so much about reduced class sizes and new examinations and curricula...

Interventions at the structural, home, policy, or school level is like searching for

your wallet which you lost in the bushes, under the lamppost because that is where there is light. The answer lies elsewhere—it lies in the person who gently closes the classroom door and performs the teaching act—the person who puts into place the end effects of so many policies, who interprets these policies, and who is alone with students during their 15,000 hours of schooling. (pp. 2-3)

A student's relationship with his or her teacher has significant implications for the student's emotional, social, and academic development. How teachers respond to students, particularly in emotionally charged situations, often is influenced by their own internal state. For example, Fredriksen & Rhodes (2004) argue that teachers with elevated levels of stress may be more likely to show "anger and hostility" (p. 48) which may negatively influence the way they interact with their students. An opportunity for connection and support may be missed.

The teaching profession has become one of the most stressful occupations (Blase, 1986), and some research has shown that burnout is more prevalent among teachers than in those individuals working in other occupations (Aloe, Amo, & Shanahan, 2013). Jennings and Greenberg (2009) note the 2013 MetLife Survey of the American Teacher which revealed that teacher satisfaction has declined 23% since 2008 and that 51% of teachers reported high stress levels several days a week. Stress may not only have negative effects on teachers. There is research supporting the idea that teacher stress results in lower achievement for students (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). A recent study found that almost 93% of teachers experienced "high levels of stress," and 7% of teachers were found to experience "low stress" (Herman, Hickmon-Rosa & Reinke, 2018, p. 96).

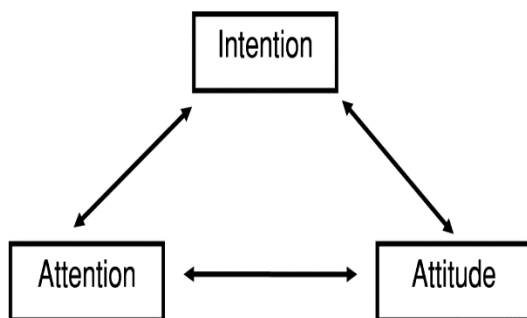


This may be because teachers who are burned out are less likely to show empathy toward their students and have less tolerance for disruptive behavior (Lucas, 2018).

Research also indicates that “socially and emotionally competent teachers have social self-awareness. They know how their emotional expressions affect their interactions with others” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009, p.495). These teachers establish the climate of the classroom by “developing supportive and encouraging relationships with their students...establishing and implementing behavioral guidelines in ways that promote intrinsic motivation, coaching students through conflict situations, [and] encouraging cooperation among students...” (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009 p. 492). Additional research suggests that positive teacher-student relationships are associated with a student’s maintenance of “interest in academic and social pursuits, which in turn lead to better grades and more positive peer relationships” (Hamre & Pianta, 2006, p. 49). Mindfulness holds promise for developing teachers’ social emotional competencies that, in turn, support positive teacher-student relationships and learning environments (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009).

**Key Mindfulness Concepts.** Figure 4 presents a model of mindfulness (Shapiro et al., 2006) that represents the axioms that work together to create mindful awareness. The researcher looked to this conception as well as additional research to get a full scope of the phenomenon of mindfulness.

Figure 4: *Shapiro's Axioms of Mindfulness* (2006): Intention, Attention, and Attitude (IAA). Interrelated, inextricable, co-occurring stages of Mindfulness.



*Presence*, a related concept, is defined by Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) as a slow-motion awareness and wide-open acceptance of the learner that is free of judgment and filled with awe of his capacity to learn. There is also a feeling of passion, not just for the subject matter, but for the human endeavor of learning itself. (p. 271) Collectively, these definitions enabled the researcher to understand the participants' wide range of experiences and outcomes that they associated with their mindfulness practices.

**Mindfulness Research in Other Fields.** Research in other fields suggests broad benefits of mindfulness. Existing research in the field of psychotherapy indicates an association between mindfulness and increased empathy, emotional regulation and compassion, and decreased reactivity, stress and anxiety (Davis & Hayes, 2011, pp. 199-203). Other popular areas of research include mindfulness and nursing (White, 2013), and mindfulness in the workplace (Glomb, Duffy, Bono, & Yang, 2016). Even military combat has identified mindfulness as an important resource, providing tools for stress reduction, increased focus and attention, emotional regulation, and the development of prosocial behaviors (Richtel, 2019). A recent *New York Times* (2019) article related the

experiences of military commander Maj. Gen. Walter Piatt who noted that mindfulness improved his soldiers' abilities to focus and calm their minds, resulting in better overall performance (Richtel, 2019). His approach was based on the work of Dr. Amishi Ja, a professor of psychology at the University of Miami. Dr. Ja found that with mindfulness training, special operations soldiers were likely to "discern key information under chaotic circumstances," increase working memory function, and make "fewer cognitive errors than service members who did not use mindfulness" (Richtel, 2019). These findings suggest that even in chaotic environments, mindfulness has the potential to improve focus, to calm the mind, and to reduce stress levels.

**Mindfulness Research in Educational Settings.** It appears that mindfulness can be pivotal in augmenting a teacher's role. When teachers consciously set an intention for each interaction with students, they are able to "pay attention with kindness, discernment, openness, and acceptance" which can "transform the experience" for teachers and students (Shapiro, Rechtschaffen and de Sousa, 2016, p. 85).

Mindfully aware teachers understand and regulate their own emotions and become attuned to students' needs (Siegel, 2007). In essence, the teacher is present to the student and available to pay attention to what Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006) describe as "the fundamentals of classroom life—the relationships, the affective and cognitive interactions between students and teachers, the construction of genuine learning experiences" (p. 265). The teacher is also present to him or herself, capable of "bringing one's whole self to full attention so as to perceive what is happening in the moment" (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006, p. 266).

The interpersonal qualities associated with mindfulness lay the foundation for authentic, respectful, and supportive teacher-learner relationships that lead to positive and academically supportive classroom climates (Jennings & Greenberg, 2009). Researchers have found that teachers who practice mindfulness may see a reduction in stress and anxiety and an overall improvement in emotional regulation (Roeser et al., 2013). Additional studies have suggested that Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction (MBSR) for teachers and other stakeholders can have a substantial impact on the overall school environment because of its emphasis on self-care and concern for the wellbeing of others (Flook et al., 2013; Jennings et al., 2017; Roeser et al., 2013). This benefit of mindfulness could result in more supportive teacher-teacher and administrator-teacher relationships.

### **Conclusion**

The chapter reviewed important foundational theories to frame the way secondary teachers “make sense of their personal experiences” (van Manen, 2017, p. 776) as mindfulness practitioners. The mindfulness literature review provided an all-encompassing working definition of mindfulness, explored the perceived benefits of mindfulness and its practice within education as well as other fields, and relayed the current landscape of mental health challenges which impact secondary education. With an increase of students who suffer from depression, anxiety, and childhood trauma, creating a space between event and response has never been more important for teachers. Still, the benefits of mindfulness for students are far reaching and move beyond the population of students who have suffered from adverse childhood trauma and/or are currently experiencing mental health challenges.

The current study extended the body of mindfulness research, offering qualitative data to provide a “means to access the subjective experience of the practitioner” (Shapiro, Rechtschaffen & de Sousa, 2016, p. 94). The goal was to bring the multidimensional benefits of mindful teaching, particularly at the secondary level, to a more central place in educational research, ultimately exploring and expanding the implications for mindfulness in teacher education and professional development. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the methods and procedures of the phenomenological study.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Methods and Procedures**

This chapter discusses the study's phenomenological methodology, setting and participants, data collection methods, data analysis methods, and limitations. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

### **Research Questions**

This phenomenological study was in response to the increasing needs of adolescents and the potential for teachers to function as a support. The researcher was interested in exploring the participants' perceptions of how they experience their mindfulness practice in interactions with students and classroom climate and how these experiences may influence the culture of their school building. The researcher developed the following three questions:

1. How do secondary educators perceive the origins of their mindfulness practices?
2. How do secondary educators perceive the connection between their contemporary mindfulness practice and their critical role as a secondary teacher?
3. What do secondary teachers perceive is the influence of mindfulness on school culture, and what barriers do they perceive in establishing mindful schools?

### **Research Design**

Max van Mannen (2017) argues that although there are a host of qualitative methodologies that are “concerned with human experience” (p. 775), phenomenologists are most concerned with “how human beings experience their world” (van Mannen, 2002, p. 24). According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), the focus of the phenomenological study is the participants’ “attitude[s] and the response[s] to the phenomenon under study,” (p. 98). The aim of the phenomenological researcher is to “achieve an analytic description of the phenomena” (p. 98). Given the complexity, richness, and subjectivity of mindfulness, this study seemed best suited for a phenomenological approach. In line with the goals of phenomenological inquiry, the researcher intended to drill down on the participants’ experiences and perceptions to discover the essence of *what* and *how* these educators exemplify their mindfulness within the context of their professional roles.

For social scientists, defining what it means to be mindful or to embody mindful awareness has posed a significant challenge. Is mindfulness an innate, particular disposition or function of one’s personality, or is it a shifting state of mind? Is mindful awareness something that can be tapped into or developed? Is it concrete, tangible, and, therefore, behaviorally observable, or is it something that one can only intuitively sense in another person? Gathering narratives from multiple teachers, rather than from a single practitioner, provided the researcher with a detailed and nuanced description of secondary teachers’ perceptions of mindfulness practices. In alignment with phenomenological

inquiry, the research questions focused on how secondary teachers experience their mindfulness practice as they work with adolescent students.

Qualitative interviewing invites the researcher, and then the reader, to enter the experiences of the person interviewed. In this study, phenomenological interviews were the primary source of data collection since they help bring forth the essence of a phenomenon through “an enormous amount of texts” and a “vast array of words, sentences and paragraphs” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 98). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2016), phenomenological interviews assume that the “perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and has the ability to be made explicit” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 74). Phenomenological interviews are a participant’s “process of selecting constitutive details of experience, reflecting on them, giving them order” (Seidman, 2006, p. 7). Through this process, participants reflect on the details of their experiences. When the interview questions are consistent across participants, the researchers gain rich and varied data.

The following sections describe how the study was designed and implemented, and how the data were analyzed to contribute to the broader discourse of mindfulness and its potential benefits in secondary education.

### ***Researcher Positionality***

In phenomenological research, the research questions emerge from the researcher’s “intense interest in a particular problem or topic” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 104). Yet, the researcher’s own subjectivity may influence the collection and interpretation of data, and so researcher transparency is key. Although the researcher had a personal mindfulness practice for many years, two years ago a colleague introduced her to the



concept of mindfulness in the context of education. She explained to the researcher that her personal mindfulness practice was markedly improving her relationships with students and transforming her classroom environment. When she invited the researcher to participate in a pilot mindfulness intervention in their high school, the researcher enthusiastically accepted. The researcher was particularly interested in how her 9th grade co-taught class of general education and special education students would respond when asked to participate in the mindfulness training activities which includes closing eyes, sitting still, focusing on breath, and visualizing calmness. Before the twelve-week intervention began, the teacher organizing the mindfulness program and the researcher attended a full-day conference which provided not only an overview of the mindfulness techniques the researcher was already using in her personal life, such as, focused breathing, seated meditation, and visualization, but it also provided a wealth of research-based evidence on the significant and varied physiological outcomes of mindfulness, particularly its effect on the adolescent nervous system. This training spoke to the researcher's heart and to her brain. She became further intrigued with mindful awareness and was curious if other educators who have a mindfulness practice shared the same positive and transforming results reported by many of the educators who participated in this training.

### ***Trustworthiness***

Although the researcher's strong belief in the power of mindfulness catalyzed the study, her experience also had the potential to shape the conduct and results of the research, albeit unknowingly. In response, the researcher consciously sought out proven strategies to strengthen the trustworthiness of the study, including Lincoln and Guba's

(1986) criteria for increasing the rigor of qualitative research. For example, to increase the credibility of a study, Lincoln and Guba advocate for “triangulation (cross-checking) of data” (p. 77) and member checking, a process which includes “informal testing of information by soliciting reactions of respondents to the investigator's reconstruction of what he or she has been told” (p. 77). Lincoln and Guba also provide techniques for increasing transferability. They encourage researchers to develop narratives with “thick descriptive data” (p. 77). By providing rich, detailed accounts, “judgements about the degree of fit or similarity may be made by others who may wish to apply all or part of the findings elsewhere” (p. 77). Equally important to qualitative research is unearthing the preconceptions and biases a researcher may bring to the study. The following describes the strategies the researcher utilized in more detail.

**Triangulation and Saturation.** To ensure the validity of the study and the credibility of the research (Lincoln & Guba, 2005), the researcher triangulated data by using “multiple perceptions to clarify meaning” (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008, p. 73). Methodological triangulation (Denzin, 2009) helps an investigator reach data saturation, which strengthens the findings of a study. In fact, Fusch and Ness (2015) found a “direct link between data triangulation and data saturation; the one (data triangulation) ensures the other (data saturation)” (p. 1411). The researcher triangulated the data with three collection methods: critical incident report, phenomenological interviews, and a focus group.

**Member Checking.** To improve the validity of the study, the researcher engaged in member checking. The researcher shared with participants’ portions of written transcripts and the researcher’s thematic analysis, asking for feedback on how accurately

the words captured the participants' experience of mindfulness in the context of their professional role.

**Thick, Descriptive Data.** To improve credibility and transferability (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), the researcher provided rich, thick descriptions of the participants' experiences of their mindfulness practice. During both the interview and the focus group, the researcher asked follow-up questions to elicit specific examples so as to bring to life the participants' experience of mindfulness in the context of secondary education. These concrete details are included in the narratives presented in the following chapter.

**Reflexivity and Bracketing.** Because a researcher brings his or her whole self to a qualitative study, complete objectivity is not entirely possible. Consequently, it is imperative that the researcher comes to understand how he or she is shaping the research process and the research findings. The researcher's background as a mindfulness practitioner who is also a secondary educator had the potential to both strengthen and weaken the research. Therefore, engaging in the process of reflexivity was important (Hsiung, 2010).

Phenomenologists often discuss reflexivity in terms of epoche (Bednall, 2006), which is also referred to as bracketing. Bracketing serves two important functions: It "mitigate[s] the potential deleterious effects of unacknowledged preconceptions related to the research" and "it facilitates the researcher reaching deeper levels of reflection" (Tufford & Newman, 2016, p. 82). Bracketing can help "enrich data collection, research findings, and interpretation," by providing the researcher with a means "to maintain self-awareness as part of an on-going process" (Tufford & Newman, 2016, p. 86). For this

study, the researcher engaged in bracketing by maintaining a research journal and creating analytic memos. The records provided an opportunity for the researcher to reflect and record the research inquiry's "subjective side" (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 119). For example, as the researcher read and listened to participant's stories, she speculated about themes that were emerging from the data and made connections both within and between the narratives (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 120). As the researcher worked in the field gathering teacher narratives and anecdotes, researcher notes allowed her to see in detail biases and assumptions about the benefits and limitations of mindfulness as they surfaced. In this way, the researcher helped ensure that any personal experience with mindfulness and mindfulness interventions in the work setting did not affect the interpretation of data. These notes were particularly instrumental for the conclusion of chapter 5.

### **Setting**

This phenomenological case study was conducted in two large, suburban, high-achieving districts in the northeastern part of the country. The Allen School District (pseudonym) has 2,300 enrolled students in grades 9-12. The graduation rate is 94%, well above the state average of 80%. The two high schools in the district have a college readiness score of 77% and are ranked in the top 225 of all high schools across the United States (U.S News and World Report, 2019). The Clairmount School District (pseudonym) also has two high schools with a combined enrollment of 2,900 students. Clairmount High Schools are ranked in the top 450 of all high schools in the U.S., have a 94% graduation rate, and a college readiness score of 63% (US News and World Report, 2019).

## **Participants**

Nine secondary educators participated in phases one and two of this study, the critical incident report and the individual interview. The research participants were all highly experienced educators who expressed a shared interest in student well-being. Each participant had some previous experience of mindfulness or other meditation practices.

Participants in the current study were purposefully selected: all participants self-identified as mindfulness practitioners who work in high-performing, academically competitive districts as identified by national standards. The researcher selected participants within these demographics since research suggests that students in high-performing schools may be even more likely to experience stress and anxiety. One recent study reveals that students in high-achieving schools have now been identified as a high-risk population (see Chapter 1).

Although the participants shared some common denominators, to avoid any potential bias from a limited pool, selected participants included both male and female teachers, teachers working in a wide range of disciplines, humanities through the sciences, and working within a broad spectrum of academic levels ranging from special education programs to the gifted and talented curriculum. Ten educators were selected for inclusion in the study; however, only nine participated. The sample included seven high school educators and two middle school educators.

Demographic information provides data about possible factors influencing participant's perceptions, allowing the readers of the study to see differences and similarities among participants (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). The researcher collected demographic data (see Appendix B) before phase 1 of the study, the critical incident

report. The researcher then created a matrix table with the participants' pseudonyms and demographic data points (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008) including the following attributes: number of years in education, number of years practicing mindfulness, discipline taught, and whether they have received teacher-specific mindfulness training.

Table 1: *Participant Demographic Matrix*

Name	Role in Education	Years of Teaching Experience	Years Practicing Mindfulness	Participated in Mindfulness Training
Jessica	HS English Teacher	11-15 years	6-10 years	Yes
Tess	HS English Teacher	More than 15 years	More than 10 years	Yes
Erin	MS Social Studies Teacher	11-15 years	1-5 years	No
Becca	HS English Teacher/ Administrator	More than 15 years	1-5 years	No
Kate	HS Science Teacher	More than 15 years	1-5 years	Yes
Rachel	HS Gifted and Talented	More than 15 years	1-5 years	Yes
Paul	HS Special Educator/ Administrator	More than 15 years	6-10 years	Yes
Dave	HS Special Educator	6-10 years	6-10 years	Yes
Tommy	HS Performing Arts Teacher	11-15 years	1-5 years	Yes

The following provides details about the participants' background, including their teaching experience and mindfulness practice.

“Jessica” is a High School English teacher who was purposely selected by the researcher because she organized a mindfulness intervention program in the researcher's building and co-attended mindfulness workshops. She is a certified yoga instructor and is actively integrating mindfulness into her curriculum.

“Tess” is a high school English teacher. She was approached by the researcher during a conversation about her extensive yoga and meditation practices. She is a graduate student and a mother of three.

“Erin” is a middle school educator who has developed and delivered several mindfulness-based interventions in her building. This participant was brought to the attention of the researcher by a colleague in the district who knew of her passion for mindfulness as well as her demonstrated rapport with students. Erin runs the mindfulness club in her building.

“Becca” is an English teacher who also develops ELA curriculum for her district. Since she is a former colleague, the researcher is familiar with her published work on teacher-student relationships and her personal and professional use of reflective journaling.

For a second time, the researcher used snowball sampling to find additional participants:

“Kate” is a secondary science teacher and is known as “the mindfulness person” in her school. She was introduced to the researcher by Becca. Kate has attended numerous retreats and reads voraciously on any topic related to mindful awareness.

“Rachel” has worked extensively to bring mindfulness to her gifted and talented students and wholeheartedly believes in the objectives of the study: to more fully understand how a teacher’s mindful awareness comes to bear in his or her interactions with students. She has worked with a team of student researchers to present their work on mindfulness at local and state conferences.

“Paul” is a secondary special education teacher who also has administrative duties in the building. This participant was brought to the attention of the researcher by several people because of his exceptional rapport with students and his well-known yoga practice and yoga instruction.

“Dave” is a high school special education teacher who works in a small class setting of six students. He and his education team routinely incorporate breathing and gratitude building techniques to increase his students’ mindful awareness throughout the school day.

“Tommy” is a high school performing arts teacher who has only recently begun a personal mindfulness practice. He brings mindfulness to his students by integrating mindfulness strategies into class lessons and by routinely sharing with his students how mindfulness has improved his own functioning.

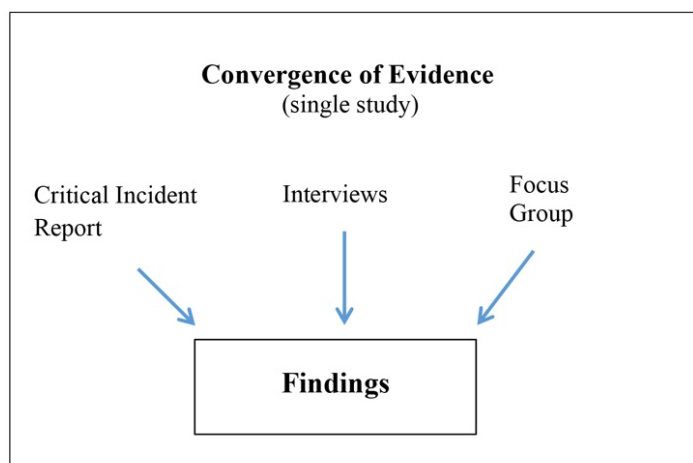
### **Data Collection Methods**

Having secured appropriate permission (see Procedure section), the researcher commenced to gather teacher narratives as textual evidence. Since mindfulness is a



complex and subjective human experience, and to improve the likelihood of data saturation, the researcher collected data from three sources. All nine participants first submitted a critical incident report (Flanagan, 1954). One qualitative researcher who employs this data gathering method describes the technique as a method for increasing the rigor of data collected via other people's stories, claiming that "[a]lthough the technique was based on gathering what were, in effect, anecdotes, by focusing interviewees on the specific problem being researched the anecdotes are given more of the qualities of data" (Bradley, 1992. P. 99). After completing the critical incident report, all nine secondary educators participated in an individual, phenomenological interview (Seidman, 2006). Five of the nine participants were interested in and available to take part in the focus group. The details of each phase are provided in the procedures section of this chapter.

The participants' stories provided the researcher a window to unearth a phenomenon "holistically in all its complexity and richness" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4). The researcher aimed for the study's findings to be "well-grounded and supportable," rather than to "represent the exact truth" (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 4). Figure 5 outlines the three methods of data collection used to triangulate findings.

Figure 5: *Data Collection Triangulation* (Yin, 2014)**Data Triangulation (Yin, 2014):**

- Establish converging lines of evidence to increase robustness of findings.
- Use multiple sources of evidence to establish the same set of evidence or “facts.”
- Evidence can include qualitative and quantitative types of data.

An additional matrix, Table 2, is provided to display the alignment of the research questions with the specific information gathered in each phase of the study and the theoretical framework(s) through which the researcher analyzed the data.

Table 2: *Research Question, Method and Framework Alignment*

Research Question	Data Collection Method	Specific Information Elicited	Theoretical Framework
RQ1. How do secondary educators describe their journey to becoming mindfulness practitioners?	Critical Incident Report/Interview	What critical events catalyzed the participants' mindfulness practices?	Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory

RQ2. How do secondary educators perceive the connection between their current mindfulness practice and their critical role as a secondary teacher?	Interview/Focus Group	1. How do mindfulness practitioners perceive their mindful awareness influencing interactions with students? 2. How do mindfulness practitioners perceive their mindful awareness influencing their classroom environment?	Interpersonal Neurobiology; Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory; Mindfulness Loop
RQ3. What do secondary teachers perceive is the influence of a school culture of mindful awareness, and what may stand in the way of establishing and maintaining one?	Focus Group	1. As mindfulness practitioners, how do you perceive mindfulness connecting to school culture? 2. As mindfulness practitioners, what obstacles do you perceive in the integration of mindful awareness into secondary schools?	Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems theory; Mindfulness Loop

## Procedure

### *Approvals*

After securing IRB approval, the researcher gained access to the two districts under study by seeking permission from each districts' Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction. The assistant superintendents signed and returned the permission letter to include participants from their respective districts. Since the

participants had already expressed interest in joining the study, next, the researcher sent permission letters to each of the participants, explaining the study in detail and asking for agreement to be interviewed and consent to be audiotaped. This permission letter is included as Appendix B. Upon final approval, the researcher commenced the first of three research phases.

### ***The Critical Incident***

Yin (2009) argues for the importance of multiple data sources in qualitative research. Through the construction and reconstruction of personal stories, narrative inquiry aims to capture and retell stories of complex human experiences (Mertova and Webster, 2007) that have the greatest influence on individuals. Hearing these stories provides the researcher with “clues worthy of further investigations” (Yin, 2009, p. 103), and thus an opportunity to make inferences about the studied phenomenon.

The idea of collecting stories that capture the origin of critical events comes from the realm of psychology. In a study on a high rate of pilot failure in training, John Flanagan (1954) developed an analytical method called the Critical Incident Technique (CIT), a method in which “incidents of success and failure are retrospectively analyzed to identify specific behaviors that caused negative or positive outcomes” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 75). In simplest terms, a critical incident report reveals a change in the storyteller’s understanding or perspective of their world by recalling events that are “unique, illustrative, and confirmatory in nature in relation to the studied phenomenon” (Webster & Mertova, 2007, p. 17). In the present study, the researcher used critical incident reports (Flanagan, 1954) to collect data from the nine participants.

In this study, the researcher sent a Google form to each of the participants, asking them to complete the form by providing a description of event(s) that they associate with the starting point of their mindfulness practice. The form is included as Appendix D. Specifically, the researcher prompted participants to recall and to reflect on a critical event, if any, that catalyzed their mindfulness practice. The Critical Incident Reports were collected via email or as a hard copy, depending on each participant's preference.

### ***Phenomenological Interviews***

Following the email or hardcopy submission of the critical incident report, the researcher conducted individual phenomenological interviews. This researcher adopted a guided approach outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (2016), including prewritten questions that served “as a basic checklist to ensure that all relevant topics are covered” (p. 74). The researcher understood that good, qualitative questions are “developed or refined in all stages of a reflexive and interactive inquiry journey” (Agee, 2009, p. 432); consequently, the researcher's exact questions were not completely predetermined, but also spontaneously created based on participants' responses. In this way, the researcher allowed the participants to shape the content of the interview (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). The interview protocol is included as Appendix E.

To elicit the most honest responses, the researcher took time at the beginning of the interview to establish rapport with participants, so they might “lighten-up and feel Since the researcher is also a secondary educator and mindfulness practitioner, the researcher and participant shared “common ground” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 99) which served as a foundation for the researcher-participant relationship. Throughout the interview, the researcher remained deeply focused, supportive and empathetic. During

and at the conclusion of each interview, the researcher engaged in memoing, reading over collected data and writing a summary of ideas and themes emerging (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). The intent was for the researcher's memos to become more generalized and thematic as subsequent interviews took place.

By conducting a preliminary study (Spring, 2019) that mirrors the larger study, the researcher was provided an opportunity to modify the research design. Based on results from the study's pilot interview, the researcher interviewed each participant for approximately 20 minutes to an hour. Depending on participant preference, the interviews took place in person or via videoconferencing. To ensure accuracy, the interviews were recorded on the researcher's iPhone and converted to text using a transcription app, Otter.ai. Appendix G displays the location and duration of participant interviews.

### ***Focus Group***

Following the individual interviews, the participants were each invited to participate in a focus group. Focus groups also lead to data saturation, as they provide an opportunity for the researcher to gather multiple perspectives on each aspect of the study (Fusch & Ness, 2015). Five teacher participants were interested and available to take part in this larger conversation about mindful schools. The focus group took place in a large meeting room in one of the two high schools in the study.

The focus group triangulated the data and further explored the experiences of mindfulness practitioners in their role as secondary teachers, particularly as their role connects to the overall school culture. This research method allowed participants to “explore and clarify their views in ways that would be less easily accessible in a one to

one interview” (Kitzinger, 1995, p. 299). According to Bogdan and Biklen (2016), focus groups foster discussion among participants and "stimulate each other to articulate their views or even to realize what their own views are" (p. 105). Prior to the focus group, the researcher discussed the importance confidentiality of what was said among the focus group members (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016).

According to Krueger and Casey (2000), focus groups are considered to be naturalistic, intending to recreate the experiences of participants’ real lives. The researcher encouraged participants to share real stories with rich, vivid, and significant details so as to invite the facilitator, that being the researcher, and fellow participants into their lives. The focus group protocol is included as Appendix F. The conversation was recorded on the researcher’s iPhone and converted to text using a transcription app, Otter.ai. The focus group lasted just over an hour (1:02:12) and included participants Jessica, Tommy, Paul, Erin, and Tess.

### **Data Analysis Methods**

This study on mindfulness in the context of secondary education was an evolutionary journey, an ongoing engagement between researcher and data that allowed for a deep and reflective interpretation of the experience (Birks et al., 2008). To accurately convey the shared experience of a phenomenon, the qualitative researcher must continuously interact with the data throughout the analytical phases of the study. The researcher read each data source, which included nine critical incident reports, nine interview transcripts, and one focus group transcript, three times, highlighting in the text emerging themes and then noting the researcher’s surfacing insights in the margins. To sort and eventually extract deeper meaning from the data, the researcher engaged in

several levels of coding, breaking down the data, and looking at each piece individually and then as a whole (Elliot, 2018). For the initial coding, the researcher decided on a method which can be viewed as indexing or mapping, “a way of tagging data that [was] relevant to a particular point” (Elliott, 2018, p. 2851).

For this researcher, new understandings and perceptions of mindfulness surfaced in response to what was appearing in the data, and shifts were “identified through and mediated by memo” (Birks et al., 2008, p. 71). For example, while interviewing the teachers, the researcher was intrigued by the discovery that not every participant engages in a formal practice, such as meditation or yoga, outside of the school day. In fact, while reflecting on the critical incident report data, the researcher was able to recognize that mindfulness and mindfulness practice were at times perceived interchangeably, and, often times, they were perceived differently not only from one participant to the next but from the researcher’s understanding of mindfulness practice, as well. To illustrate, the data emerging from the critical incident reports indicated that some participants conceived of their mindfulness as “a way that I am” at a specific moment, while other participants identified their practice more as something they do, meaning a technique, strategy, or method for developing a state of mindful awareness. Identifying the overlap between the narratives became increasingly important, but the researcher noticed that teachers frequently appeared to use different terminology to describe similar experiences. The analysis required careful consideration of language.

Phenomenologist Max van Mannen (2017) argues that there is a wide availability of computer-assisted software to “guide researchers through generating, analyzing, and converting raw data” which is the “strongest indicator that the most central and most



difficult part of phenomenological research” is “generating insights into the structures of lived human experience” (p. 779). However, the researcher did use software to aid the coding of participant responses. After reading and re-reading the interview transcriptions, the researcher analyzed the data by mining for keywords within the realm of mindfulness and relationships. As the first step to interpreting data, the researcher uploaded the transcripts to NVIVO, a qualitative software program. Then, the researcher aimed to identify recurring “words, events, or circumstances” as well as ideas that relate to the “ideas and findings in the existing literature” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 154). Frequent words identified included *focus*, *calm*, *stress*, *connection*, and *present*. The researcher entered those parts of the text to see the context of the participants’ responses and to determine whether the statements were significant. The researcher defined significance as a statement in alignment with one of the three overarching inquiries.

By utilizing the data analysis technique described by Bogdan and Biklen (2016), the researcher organized the data into relevant clusters and then eliminated any irrelevant and repetitive components. By hand, the researcher grouped thematically similar pieces of data together and created broad, more abstract headings for the groupings, such as external pressure on students. Under each heading, the researcher kept a list of concrete details (Kleinling & Witt, 2015), e.g. words the participants used to discuss interactions with challenging students or words teachers used to describe their perceptions of an optimal learning environment. Through this process, overall patterns of similarities and differences emerged, allowing the researcher to understand how the participants in general experience the phenomenon of mindfulness practice (Kleinling & Witt, 2015). The researcher kept track of emerging connections between and patterns among the data.

Tables 3 and 4 present examples of the researcher's data collection. Table 3 presents a sample of frequently used words in the interviews and focus group. Table 4 presents the alignment between code labels and major concepts of the theoretical and conceptual frameworks.

Table 3: *Sample Code Book, Including Emergent Terms and Response Frequency*

Code Label	Number of Participants Who Mentioned Term	Number of Times Term Was Mentioned* *including stemmed words	Example from Participant Narratives
Space	8 of 9 participants + Focus Group	74	You can't let all of these other thoughts beat you up while you're in here, this is your safe <b>space</b> for you. -“Rachel”
Breath	9 of 9 participants + Focus Group	95	I think when you're doing that and consciously <b>breathing</b> , your mind's not really drifting about towards anything else; that's happening while you're doing your practice. So, it's a good way to be focusing on your breathing. You're blocking everything else. -“Pete”
Stress	7 of 9 participants + Focus Group	36	I'm <b>stressed</b> , I'm anxious because of something that's outside but that thing outside isn't going anywhere. Gotcha. So, in order for me to deal with life, I have to create change internally. -“Jessica”

Table 4: *Sample Code Book, Data and Framework Alignment*

Code Label	Amount of Usage	Definition	Framework/ Notes	Example from Participant Narrative
Presence / Present	9 of 9 Participants + Focus Group  59 mentions	Presence is “a state of receptive awareness of our open minds to whatever arises as it arises” (Siegel, 2007, pp. 160-161).	-Shapiro’s 3-Axium Model of Mindfulness -IPNB Theory (how presence supports mindfulness) -Ecological Theory – how a teacher’s mindfulness impacts students’ nested systems  Note: The heart of presence is embracing the moment as a fresh experience without analyzing what is happening.	So, you know, a person's full and mindful <b>present</b> awareness leaves room for somebody else, somebody besides themselves. When we're all so swept up in our own selves, there's no room for looking out, for reading other people's faces, reading other people's feelings and needs, and not to be only focused on your own. -“Kate”

Code Label	Amount of Usage	Definition	Framework/ Notes	Example from Participant Narrative
Relationships/ Connection	<p><i>Relationships:</i> 6 of 9 Participants + Focus Group 26 mentions</p> <p><i>Connections:</i> 7 of 9 Participants + Focus Group 43 mentions</p>	The flow of energy and information between two or more people (Siegel 2012)	<p>-Shapiro's 3-Axiom Model of Mindfulness</p> <p>-IPNB Theory (how mindfulness enhances relationships by enhancing energy and information flow between teacher and students)</p> <p>-Ecological Theory – how relationships develop within nested systems</p>	So, I really started cultivating an intention about it, you know, the <b>relationship</b> part, having the students know I care. And when I notice I'm not thinking about that <b>connection</b> , I slow down and I reset. -“Erin”

The researcher was prepared to add participants as needed to elicit rich data on the studied phenomenon; however, nine participants allowed the researcher to satisfy “saturation of information,” defined by Seidman (2006) as a point in a study when the interviewer begins to hear the same information reported and “he or she is no longer learning anything new” ( p. 70). Saturation was evident as similar experiences emerged from the teacher narratives and themes were repeated.

### **Limitations of the Study**

Although the goal of the researcher was to augment the professional knowledge of improved teacher-student relationships, there were several limitations in this study. First, the findings were based on teachers from two school districts which limit the generalizability of the results; however, the thick description of data and transparency of research design and process hopefully allows for transferability. Additionally, a pool of nine teacher participants was relatively low. Although 12 teachers initially expressed interest in participating in the study, three teachers were no longer available when the study commenced, partially due to the holiday break and partially due to unexpected personal obligations. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the researcher was prepared to add participants as needed to gather rich data. However, because the study pulled data from three points, including critical incident reports, individual interviews and a focus group, the researcher had the opportunity to deeply explore the participants' past and present experiences with mindfulness, as well as their ideas about the future of mindfulness at the secondary school level.

The geographic distance between several of the participants and the researcher can also be viewed as a limitation. Although the participants and the researcher did attempt to schedule face-to-face interviews, the constraints of both the researcher's schedule and participants' schedules made phone interviews a viable forum for collecting teacher narratives. Interestingly, the interviews conducted over the phone were some of the longer interviews than those conducted in person, and also, at times, yielded the most personal, candid responses from the teachers.

Finally, it is likely that the study population was biased toward the positive influence of mindfulness practice on teacher-student interactions and classroom climate. However, the goal of the researcher was to allow for transferability, rather than generalizability, about the potential of mindfulness to other populations. The intent behind this study was not to discover a “transcendent truth” but rather to offer the reader a “particular rendering or interpretation of reality grounded in the empirical world” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 24) by providing detailed and accurate descriptions of the data collected.

### **Conclusion**

Unlike in quantitative research, qualitative research provides opportunity for study participants to share the nuances of their experiences in an authentic voice and in a real-world environment. The data, derived from critical incident instruments, phenomenological interviews, and a focus study, was used to determine how teachers interpret and make meaning of their experiences of mindful awareness in the context of their teaching role. These findings may provide guidance to educational leaders regarding the content and structure of teacher preparation and professional development programs that seek to support teachers in two ways: to provide strategies for improving well-being and reducing symptoms of burnout and to provide concrete tools for strengthening their relationship with secondary students. In chapter 4, the findings are presented in narrative form.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Findings**

In this study, the researcher analyzed data from three separate but complementary data sources to determine if and in what ways the study participants shared a common experience of what it means to be a mindfulness practitioner in the context of secondary education. The present study bridges gaps in mindfulness literature by both zeroing in on educators who work with adolescents, as opposed to elementary school-aged students, and by taking a keen look at how teachers perceive their mindfulness during interactions with students, regardless of whether they directly or formally practice guided mindfulness in their classrooms. To include a wide range of perspectives, teachers from various disciplines and academic levels were invited to participate in this study. By listening deeply to each of their stories, this researcher endeavored to answer three essential questions:

1. How do secondary educators perceive the origins of their mindfulness practices?
2. How do secondary educators perceive the connection between their contemporary mindfulness practice and their critical role as a secondary educator?
3. What do secondary teachers perceive is the influence of a school culture of mindful awareness, and what may stand in the way of establishing and maintaining one?

The three phases of this study were not conducted in a vacuum, but rather the researcher used the data collected from each source, specifically the critical incident

report, interviews, and focus group, to clarify, extend, and corroborate the findings at each phase of the study. The research process was iterative, with each step of the exploration influencing and thus shaping the other phases. For example, through the critical incident report, information was gathered about events that catalyzed each participant's mindfulness practice. Then during the interview phase, participants were asked to elaborate on these experiences. In the focus group, participants were prompted to discuss their experiences as a group to broaden the insights. Interestingly, the events often occurred long in the participants' pasts. To increase the credibility of the study, excerpts of participants' narratives that objectively captured (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) the secondary teachers' experiences of mindfulness are included.

### **Research Question 1: Origins of Practice**

The first research question regarding how secondary educators perceive the origins of their mindfulness practices was explored during the critical incident report, individual interviews, and focus group. An analysis of data revealed that most participants were drawn to mindfulness practice because they were looking for clarity, focus, and a sense of calm and control over their lives, in the face of changing circumstances. For the majority of participants, seven of nine, mindfulness practice originated in their personal lives; only two participants reported initiating a mindfulness practice in the context of their role as secondary teachers.

In identifying the reasons participants turned to mindfulness practice and the benefits they feel they've gained from it, three major themes emerged from the data. They will be explored in depth in the following section as follows:



1. Participants turned to mindfulness at a crossroad in life, during a personal crisis, or after a traumatic life event.
2. Participants turned to mindfulness to shift a pattern in thought or behavior.
3. Participants who started a mindfulness practice in their professional world, as opposed to their personal life, did so to address the specific needs of their students.

***Participants Turned to Mindfulness at a Crossroad in Life, During a Personal Crisis, or After a Traumatic Life Event***

A major theme emerged from the research indicating that the origins of mindfulness was rooted in self-care during a tumultuous period in the participant's life. In terms of critical events in the lives of practitioner participants, the desire to understand or cope with a challenging personal relationship or a significant change in their lives was one of the most significant cross-participant finding. Six of the nine participants shared narratives that reinforced this theme.

During her individual interview, Becca shared that the life experience that sparked an "interest in mindfulness beyond the apps and the hype" was the dissolution of her marriage. She marked this period in her life as critical to her mindfulness practice, since it was a period when she "was very frustrated" and felt like she "wasn't being heard or supported." The feelings were, at times, overwhelming, and Becca was looking to give herself "space and quiet to reconnect" with herself and to re-discover the life she had planned for herself.

Similarly, Tommy also was experiencing the end of a relationship when he turned to mindfulness. Both in his critical incident report and in his personal interview, Tommy

also spoke of the disappointment he felt at the end of his marriage, and he discussed questioning what the future had in store for him. He had imagined a life that he was “supposed to live,” but the relationship was changing. He wanted to accept the transition and be able “to move forward” in his own life while also allowing his husband to “move forward in his life.” For guidance, Tommy and his husband entered therapy “not to save the relationship, but to answer the question “how are we going to live our lives differently?” They were in search of an “understanding” and peace, and they wondered, “What's the new normal when an entire adult life had been spent together in that structure?”

Tommy believes that an early version of his mindfulness practice emerged during therapy. He recalled that, in those sessions, he had a new and meaningful experience: he learned to notice where his emotions were registering in his body. He recalled that he and his husband’s therapist was:

very much in line with Dharma practice and mindfulness, which was new to me, and I remember him asking me questions like, *where* do you feel this, not *what* are you feeling? And I was so taken aback that I had to pause, and then I started to think about acknowledging what was happening physically in my body when I was having different feelings.

For Tommy, this was a “shift,” a time when he started to consider the mind-body connection. When asked what he hoped to gain from this new way of thinking, Tommy recollected that he “was searching for a whole shift, really, in thought pattern,” since, at that moment, he was “in crisis.” Mindfulness provided an understanding and an allowance to feel, which he believed he needed at that crossroads in his life.

Similarly, Jessica was drawn to mindfulness at a time in her life when she “had too much going on, and that wasn't changing,” so she had to “change something else.” She, too, had been in search of a new way to cope with a significant shift in her life. For Jessica, that period was marked by a change in location, in career, and in family. At the time, she was fairly unhappy and was considering a new career and moving back to her home state. Jessica recalled a particularly stressful year when she was planning her wedding and experiencing significant conflict with her future in-laws. Searching for a way to feel better, Jessica started practicing Hot Yoga as a New Year's Resolution, which “literally changed” her life. Although Jessica remembered the year leading up to her wedding as a markedly challenging juncture, she talked about her mindfulness practice as something she often leaned into.

During the interview, Jessica was asked to talk more about those events that inspired her to turn to mindfulness practice. She shared that there were “different moments” in her life that interested her in mindfulness practice, but the common thread she came to perceive was a pattern of knowing that there “needed to be some kind of change” in her life, but, at the same time, she also realized that the circumstances themselves “can't change, not really.” Through her discomfort, Jessica came to a new realization that “In order for me to deal with life, I have to create change internally.”

Furthering this theme of turning to mindfulness during a personal crisis, Kate linked her interest in mindfulness to the end of an “emotionally abusive relationship” that she was in for 11 years, which she noted was, at that time, a third of her life. She, too, was looking for new coping strategies to help her navigate a critical life change. At one point, she began thinking that “maybe [she] could make [her]self happier by studying

how to be happy!” A colleague recommended the book *Happiness: A Guide to Developing Life's Most Important Skill* by Matthieu Ricard. In reading this book, Kate learned about meditation and, for the first time, she was introduced to the idea that the heart is a “luminous light, shining light out at others,” as well as to the notion that a person can “rid yourself of emotional pain by breathing.” Kate embraced this concept and used it as a foundation for her emerging mindfulness practice.

Erin had a similar rationale for her initial interest in mindfulness. She indicated on her critical incident report that she began her mindfulness journey several years ago “at a time when things felt very out of control.” Erin shared in her interview that at the point in her life when she was drawn to mindfulness, she “had experienced a lot of setbacks, personal setbacks” and was struggling to find a way to cope. Erin described a time when she had recently gotten divorced and was “having personal relationship issues, like just not feeling connected to friends and family” as much. In fact, she felt disconnected from many different areas of her life. Through contemplative practice, Erin hoped for “a better perspective on, everything, really, a way to relate to things in a clearer, more systematic way.” Although she had heard of mindfulness before, she had never given it much thought, but it was something about the emotions she was experiencing then that made her consider mindfulness “and the possible benefits of meditation in particular.” Similarly to Tommy, Erin described to me that she hoped to find in mindfulness “a way to feel better and clearer” while navigating her divorce.

Through vivid and detailed narratives, these participants described their mindsets during difficult times in their lives and how their desire for more control, peace, and clarity during a time of tumult and change led them to exploring mindfulness.

***Participants Turned to Mindfulness to Shift Established Patterns in Thought or Behavior***

A less significant but still prevalent theme emerged around the participants' search for strategies that would foster self-growth or self-improvement. For Paul, this was the realization that he would like to be more present to people. Paul indicated on his critical incident report that his mindfulness practice had started with yoga when he was looking for ways to heal sports injuries. In phase two of the study, the one-to-one interview, Paul reflected more deeply on the origins of his practice. He recalled having a moment of realization when he attended a district-wide mindfulness training and heard something that resonated with him. Paul had recognized himself in one of the presenter's characterizations of people who might benefit from being a little more mindful. When asked to recount that day, Paul smiled, and, looking out across the room, he recalled that morning's presentation:

The guy [the presenter] referred to some people as being fast listeners. And I thought, *That's definitely me* [laughs]. Truthfully, I had never really thought about it in those exact terms, but I did know that for years, people would [laughs] joke about how, when they're, or we're, in the middle of a conversation I, you know, just up and go because [laughs] I'm kind of done with it. The conversation.

Paul remembered watching the presenter and feeling a shift at that point. He had been "skeptical about someone doing mindfulness with an auditorium full of people, some pretty cynical [laughs]," yet he felt that the potential to be a "slower listener" appealed to him. For Paul, this was a critical event, and he accepted the facilitator's suggestion that mindful awareness could definitely slow people down, allowing them to be more present

for others. Interestingly, Paul demonstrated this very quality throughout the course of the study. Both in the individual interview and in the focus group, Paul stood out for his sustained eye contact and active listening with the other participants and with the researcher. This included turning toward whoever was speaking with his whole body, nodding, and asking for clarification when necessary.

In her interview, Tess also recalled a time in her life when she recognized a pattern in behavior and was looking to make a change in her responses to her children and to her students. Like Paul, Tess wanted to find strategies that could help her to be more present with others. She described a point when she consistently felt hurried and knew that it was important to slow down in some way. She “had three young children at home and was working full-time, and the situation, really, in both places, started to feel pretty overwhelming.” Tess found that working full-time as a teacher and then going home to start “her second job” felt like “being on [her] feet, literally and figuratively, throughout the entire day, from morning till night, and that was so taxing.” For Tess, the hardest part about balancing these two roles was feeling that she was “always trying to pay attention to what seemed like hundreds of details, every minute of the day with students and with lessons, and with all the responsibilities that go along with teaching.” Tess allowed herself to be open and honest at that point as she shared her experience from so many years ago:

When I came home in the late afternoon, even though I was tired, I had to, you know, to pay attention to every detail of my kids’ lives. Like the small details—the lunches and the clothes and the laundry...the routines and all of that. It was so stressful, and it became overwhelming.

When asked to elaborate on her early experience, Tess described the specific behaviors she wanted to address. She shared in her interview that she saw herself losing her temper more often and becoming a person she didn't want her children to “have as a mom or students to have as a teacher.” Specifically, she turned to mindfulness as she started to notice that, at times, she would “snap and be mad and put the needs of the moment before the needs of the kids and the students.” When asked if she could better clarify the person she was at that moment in time, Tess looked out the window and shared:

I wanted to be that person who I really am, you know. And be truly present to all these children, my own and my students. I wanted to be able to pay attention to the real things [laughs] that really mattered in our lives which was not, I knew, is the lunch made, or are we in bed by seven o'clock. You know, The World Ends, kind of thing.

Tess “wanted to be able to fix this feeling, and find something to give” herself, something she described as a feeling of “some peace,” and something that would help her “to focus, again, on what really, really matters.” Tess hoped that through mindfulness practice, she could learn to have better control of stress and better control of her reactions to it.

Tess recalled that her entry into mindfulness was keeping a gratitude journal to remind herself “of all the positive things she had going on in her life which [she] enjoyed,” yet she soon needed something besides that journal to get to where she thought she wanted to be. As she began practicing yoga, as well, she became more familiar with mindfulness, which is “a big part of that practice, creating that mindful presence and awareness.” Mindfulness, Tess shared with a smile, seemed to offer what she was “looking for at that time... like a bridge to that place. Yeah, a bridge to that space and

that peace and balance...” At that point in the interview, the researcher listened intently to her. Tess was invited to reflect on that time and describe what it was for which she was looking:

I think at that point in my life, peace and focus and centeredness appealed to me. I have always wanted and still want to be centered and at peace and calm. Yoga deepened or extended my mindfulness practice from this idea of expressing gratitude to doing something more, like embracing my mind and then connecting my body to my breath and to my mind. The opportunity for reflection.

When asked if she could try to give an overall idea of what she was searching for at that period of her life, Tess noted that what she was looking for “really, was a more mindful existence.” For Tess, mindfulness was a way to create internal change and gain control over her thoughts and emotions.

In addition to viewing her divorce as a catalyzing factor, Erin also credited her exploration of mindfulness to the difficulty she was having managing dual roles of mother and teacher. She was encouraged to think back to that particular time in her life and explain what she was thinking and feeling. Similarly to Tess, Erin remembered feeling “so depleted” by the time she went home because she was “so on at work.” When she would return home late afternoon and sometimes early evening, she felt that she did not have “enough reserves for [her] own children” or the “motivation to go to the gym after work.” She shared the experience of having “nothing left to help [her] kids with their own homework.” She felt that there was “essentially nothing left” for her after a long day of teaching and then caring for her own children. For Erin, mindfulness seemed to be the answer. She had heard that the practice was helpful because of “that analogy of



you have to put the oxygen mask on yourself first,” and that, “you can't pour from an empty cup.” By the end of her interview, Erin had provided a detailed window into the period when she began to first explore mindfulness. She was overwhelmed by the stresses of balancing work and home, of being a teacher and of being a mom. It finally hit her; Erin needed something to change internally.

***Participants' Mindfulness Practices Originated to Address the Specific Needs of Their Students, Rather Than from Needs Within Their Personal Lives***

This theme pertains to the subset of participants who did not indicate beginning their mindfulness practice outside of their work role; they made no mention of a traumatic or challenging life event, or a desire to shift a pattern in thought or behavior, that drew them to the practice. Instead, these two participants trace the origins of their mindfulness practice to their desire to help their students.

Rachel marked the origins of her practice as a time five years ago when she recognized significant stress in her students that she felt was impacting their overall functioning. She commented that her “students reported that they were feeling especially overwhelmed and anxious.” They would often share with her that they were experiencing significant “external pressures on them.” According to Rachel, the students in her middle school had “these internal feelings of perfectionism” which Rachel came to see was a “part of being a gifted individual.” As their teacher, Rachel felt “an overall sense that the adults are putting a lot of pressure on top, and society is putting a lot of pressure on [them],” yet, Rachel noted, the students perceived that the adults are “all just telling them [the students] to suck it up.” Rachel believed that her students had “no strategies to

deal.” Ultimately, she perceived that her students were “getting a lot of Band Aid solutions” thrown at them but no real strategies to deal with their stress and anxiety.

Rachel had wanted to better support her students. She and her students started “looking at a variety of resources” to deal with their stress and, interestingly, it was the students themselves who “chose to pursue mindfulness research to help them thrive.” As an extension of her work with students, Rachel decided to fully immerse herself in the research and the practice. She started taking mindfulness courses and meeting with a local mindfulness group to meditate. Rachel was not expecting any specific benefit from the mindfulness, and she admitted, “I was not sure if it would help or what it would do, to be quite honest.” Rachel’s mindfulness practice began extending from her role as a teacher to her personal life, including mindful walking and meditative breathing. Her personal practice outside of the workday is explored more fully in theme two of research question two.

Similar to Rachel’s perception of the origins of her mindfulness, when Dave, a special education teacher, was questioned about his personal mindfulness practice, he shared that, for him, mindfulness was, for the most part, “a work practice.” Dave described engaging in visualization and meditation when he was an athlete, but that practice “fell off” until he started integrating mindfulness into his teaching. He shared that, at this point in life, he does not consistently take time out of the day to practice it himself. However, Dave specifically shared that students with disabilities and cognitive difficulties “thrive on schedule and routine,” and the mindfulness activities help them to navigate the day. Dave recognized in his students a consistent pattern with difficulty transitioning from one space and activity to the next; he turned to mindfulness practices,

such as yoga and breathing, to help “center” the students. He found this particularly beneficial when the students returned to the classroom from lunch.

### **Research Question 2: Contemporary Mindfulness Practice in Professional Roles**

The second research question shifts the study’s focus from details of the participants’ journeys toward becoming practitioners to their perceptions of how mindfulness impacts their work as secondary educators, particularly the ways mindfulness matters and/or manifests in the participants’ interactions with students and in their classroom climate. The researcher’s aim was to further understand the experiences of middle or high school educators who are mindfulness practitioners as they navigate a high pressure, high performing environment.

An important cross-participant and within-participant finding is that mindfulness within a school context centers around intentionality. In both their individual interviews and in the focus group, participants expressed their own intentions to create strong relationships with students and to establish a classroom climate that supports student emotional well-being and academic growth. Additionally, the participants continuously described the importance of paying close attention to their own surfacing feelings, to the students’ emotions, and to the overall “feeling in the room,” described by participants as the “vibe” or “buzz” or “energy” in the room. A third cross-participant finding included the participants’ perceptions of how mindfulness practice builds their capacity to be present for students and in their teaching practice with a non-judgmental, empathetic, and calm “attitude.” Several spoke of the ability for mindfulness to create space to pause and to “reset,” so they could more effectively respond and guide students to more effective outcomes.

Through participant narratives, several noteworthy themes surfaced:

- Mindfulness practice is sometimes a way that a person feels or experience a situation, and, at other times, mindfulness practice is something a person does.
- Mindfulness practices enable teachers to self-regulate emotions, which they feel helps create a better understanding of and connection to their students.
- Through their own signature, mindful presence, teachers believe they create the overall “feel” or “vibe” of a classroom.
- Although mindfulness is an effective teacher tool for reducing student stress, participants feel there are broader benefits to be explored, including establishing a classroom climate conducive to learning.

***Mindfulness Practice is Sometimes a Way That a Person Feels or Experience a Situation, and, at Other Times, Mindfulness Practice is Something a Person Does***

Not surprisingly, the data suggested that defining mindfulness as a general way of thinking, feeling, or interacting is not entirely possible. What is more compelling, however, is how the individual participants’ conceptions of mindfulness grounds their practice. For Paul, mindfulness practice “just comes up whenever, and wherever;’ it is not something he necessarily does with students, such as guiding them through a meditation or a collective breath. When Paul was asked to elaborate on his perception, he explained that although he regularly does yoga, he does not have a “formal mindful practice in school.” He added, “It’s just being self-aware. It’s being present for the person who’s right here... instead of moving on to what’s in my head and the things that I’m more interested in or occupied with.”

Tommy envisioned his mindfulness practice as having “two parts.” First, he stated, there is “the overall meditative, sit down meditation portion of it that I do every day, every morning.” He talked of his stressful commute driving out from the city to the suburbs in rush hour and not wanting his stress to bleed into his work with students. Since he cannot change the commute, Tommy manages his stress proactively. He defines the other part as “day-to-day, minute-to-minute, moment-to-moment techniques that I use in trying situations, like in my commute [laughs] and in class with the students.” Tommy’s practice begins in his personal life, at home before heading to work, and extends into his professional life, in his classroom when he is dealing with students.

Tommy also connected his mindful awareness to the practice of being intentional. Specifically, he described setting an intention to regularly meditate and engage in visualization strategies, an intention which he credits with “establishing” his practice. He also spoke about setting intentions for his work with students. When asked to describe what he meant by being intentional, he characterized an intentionally mindful teacher as someone who understands that, in a secondary school, teachers cannot always “predict what's going to happen,” but they can think about “what's happened in the past ” and know themselves and how they typically react in situations Tommy was asked to provide some concrete examples of what this quality looks like in his classroom:

If I have one class that's particularly rowdy, and more difficult to handle... or I notice I am more reactive in that class, then, going into that class, I set an intention:...I'll try to embody more compassion and remind myself, *everyone's got a chance because there's space for you, and for what you're doing*. And I

remind myself, *just because it's not what I would have done, that doesn't mean that there's no space for it.*

Tommy's description reveals a conception of mindfulness as fostering an open and accepting attitude toward others.

Tess also described her mindfulness practice as an act of intention which validates the theme that mindfulness practice can both be viewed by the practitioner as a state or a behavior. In terms of what she does to practice mindfulness, Tess spoke at length about breathing as a foundational part of her intention to build mindful awareness. She referenced her breath as a means for calming her mind in the morning and as a vehicle through which she connects to the intention of her practice. For Tess, mindfulness involves the "moments when I connect my mind to my body, and connect my thoughts to my breath, and then I can proceed with clarity and purpose, with whatever it is that I'm doing. It's when I feel a conscious awareness of the moment." When asked to characterize her mindfulness practice, Tess paused and then answered:

I guess it almost depends on what you mean by practice, right? I think I'm at a point in my life where, it's just, I see so many things through that lens, a lot. But then, at the same time, I guess there are ways in which I access it more formally, and then there are ways in which it [looks away] just affects how I think about things.

In viewing her mindfulness as a "lens" through which to see her life, Tess illustrates that mindfulness can be a way of thinking or a formal practice.

Jessica's perception that her mindfulness is sometimes a formal practice, and, at other times, a state of mind also validates the theme that mindfulness encompasses both

action and ways of thinking. In her interview, she talked about the connection between mindfulness and setting an “intention behind whatever it is you're doing.” In yoga class, Jessica “might focus on letting go of judgment.” She added that her practice extends beyond yoga class and into her life in general, including when she is in her professional role. She said, “I'm trying to be present with a person and really listen to them. And be aware of my emotions and where those are leading me.” For Jessica, the overall essence of mindfulness “is the intentionality behind it all, you know, actively trying to do those things that will make you accomplish what you are trying to accomplish, whether that’s letting go of things or not judging or whatever you want to work on.”

Perhaps the boldest description of what it means to be mindful came from Kate. She believes that mindful presence “teaches you that you do not have to listen to all of your thoughts, that they are just a thing that your brain does because your brain’s job is to think.” For her, mindfulness is about mastering your brain so as to “master your freedom and happiness.”

Findings from all three data points reveal that, for the nine participants, mindfulness practice is both complex and uniquely experienced. The narratives suggest that mindfulness can be experienced as an internal state, expressed as a behavior, and, at times, can be both simultaneously, as in Tommy’s two-part practice. In addition, the participants utilize mindfulness practice to create the tone of what they perceive to be an optimal learning environment, whether that be a place of calm, focus, gratitude, support and/or happiness. Research Question 3 explored how these individual environments contribute to the overall culture of the school.

***Mindfulness Practices Enable Teachers to Self-Regulate Emotions, Which They Feel Help Create a Better Understanding of and Connection to Their Students***

This theme explores how participants manage their own emotions through mindfulness in order to be less reactive to negative student behavior and to be more present to students in general.

The participants' statements indicate that for secondary teachers, managing responses to negative student behaviors, such as disrupting the class, refusing to complete work, or confronting the teacher, is a challenging part of their role. During his interview, Dave talked about some past experiences when he had in his class "kind of aggressive kids, and there would be these verbal attacks on a personal level." Dave believes that his own mindfulness helps him to better handle these types of teacher-student interactions and to avoid over-personalizing the students' behavior. Mindfulness, he believes, allows him to "just take a break and breathe and think that like, hey, they don't mean it, they just sort of say whatever they can say to hurt us [laughs]." Mindfulness also helps him to gain a more flexible perspective by realizing, "No, they won't mean what they're saying at all within 10 minutes." When asked to relate this experience to mindfulness, Dave responded:

"I guess mindfulness allows that ability to depersonalize it. I guess you have to have the ability to take a step back and take a few minutes to yourself, and that's what mindfulness can do. It can help you to, instead of reacting, taking a minute to reset."

Tess elaborated upon the connection between effective teaching and effective emotional regulation and how they are associated with mindfulness. She reflected on an



experience she had with a student where she felt she might have responded more defensively had she not paused, breathed, and reset first. Tess had been working with “a high achieving student” who “wanted to simply do a task, write this literary analysis, to get it done, and to get credit and move on.” Tess, however, wanted to talk with the student about the assignment and have the student take time to brainstorm, outline, and draft the analysis. She shared in her interview that this overly-focused-on-the-grade approach to learning was “opposite” to what she believed to be “true about learning;” she “just didn’t understand it” and then “didn’t understand her at all.” Tess shared that she wanted to get the student to see the value in the process of learning rather than the grade; however, from her perspective, the student only wanted to get the credit.

Tess recalled the student’s attitude as standing “in such direct contrast to my own view of the world, really, so that I couldn’t understand her perspective.” By tapping into her own mindfulness, she could pause long enough to label her own feelings as frustration with the student and disappointment that she was unable to “have any access to anything emotional” in her student at that moment. It was then that Tess framed the problem in a new way. She asked the student, “If this didn’t count for any points, what would you change? Let’s just imagine now that I’m going to give you all of the credit. Now, what would you do differently?” The student could articulate first steps for writing the essay. Tess identified this interaction with a student as an example in which her own mindfulness helped her get “unstuck” and thus redirect herself and her student toward a more positive outcome.

Another narrative from Tess illustrates that sometimes an educator’s mindful presence helps them to stay out of the rabbit hole with students and engage in positive,

solution, student-centered conversations. Tess relayed an interaction with a student when she felt confused and challenged:

A student had been having a rough time in ... disrupting the class and just not being pleasant and wanting to fight me. And I finally got him to come in to see me, to talk about ... what I was seeing and what I expected in terms of classroom behavior. He was feeling defensive and wanted to talk about how unfair he felt it all was and how he didn't do anything. And he was angry, and he was trying to, you know, vent at me and blame me and that type of thing. And I felt sort of attacked, at first, and confused. It's not the way I saw the situation. I wanted to defend myself, but I also knew we had to move forward with this, and I had to, you know, lead the way.

Tess recalled practicing her breathing and delaying the impulse to respond. She thought about where those feelings of frustration were registering in her body and tried "to relax and reset before responding." As Tess tuned into her own emotional response, to her own feelings in that moment as she interacted with this student, she could shift from her own perspective and see the student through a new lens. Tess smiled as she relayed the rest of the story:

As he was talking, I could suddenly see exactly what was happening with him. He was just frustrated, and he didn't know what to do with all that energy. And I sat with him, and I was quiet with him, and I listened...and I said, 'So, what are we doing here?' Again, I wanted to get to, like, what was really important. 'What are we doing here and what would *you* like to do?' And I gave him a moment to

pause and reflect, and he took a minute and then he said, 'I just don't want it to be like this anymore.'

Tess was asked to provide details about what she saw as the impact of that conversation:

Well, first he moved his own seat; I didn't move him. You know, so that day in the office, I asked him to come up with a plan. And he said, 'Do you think I should move my seat?' I said, 'Well, that's up to you.' So, I kind of gave it to him to fix. And, you know what? He moved his own seat, and he's been participating in a pleasant way where before that conversation with him, it was, like, distracting the way he was participating.

By paying attention to the emotions "that were surfacing right there, in my office, in the moment, and not focusing on the behavior," Tess was able to self-regulate and avoid being defensive. As a result, she helped shift her student from problem-oriented thinking to solution-oriented thinking.

Tommy extended this theme that emotional regulation is an important benefit of teacher mindfulness practices. He specifically connected his practice with his ability to "hold back" and not take other people's behavior personally. He set the stage for his approach with his description of what secondary teachers deal with on a typical school day:

On any given day, you know, as a teacher, we make 1000 decisions a day. We are just asked so many, many questions [laughs], all day. And you go into the day with a plan, and then all of these things are in your way...So then how are you dealing with those things? As educators, we have this responsibility; we are building the character and the nature of human relationships in our interactions

with the students. And, so, I need to know when to, and how do I hold back.

That's my phrase, hold back.

During the focus group, Tommy guided the participants through a specific experience where, to support a student, he had to "hold back" and avoid personalizing the student's actions. He identified this as a mindful teaching moment. Throughout the experience, he could understand "all of the other things that teenagers are going through," aside from what is happening at school. He shared an account of a student who had missed his first period class for nearly a month. Tommy knew missing class "had been a pattern with him before," but he also felt that a whole month of missing class was "extreme." His first concern was, "What's wrong? What's going on with him? Is it something else?" Tommy explored how he was perceiving the situation at the time:

Rather than thinking, *No, this never happens to me, this is the only time in my 12 years a student has missed this much class. This is an affront to me; it's disrespectful to me*, there was this consciously taking the 'me' out of it. Yes, eventually it was going to have to be a situation where he will have to get an incomplete or a D or an F or whatever it is, and that, that is something as the teacher I'm gonna have to deal with.

Tommy's response echoes other participants' belief in the importance of the relationship between teacher and student. As Tommy explained, "at any moment, the main concern is the student, and I think that's mindfulness."

Beyond handling difficult student behavior that may crop up, almost all of the participants spoke of a teacher's responsibility for resetting throughout the day within the hectic secondary school environment. Many credit mindfulness as a tool to do

so. Rachel spoke of using mindfulness to transition from her personal life to her professional life. She described the stress of early mornings at her house and her determination not to introduce that heightened emotion to her students but, instead, to work through the feelings and “reset.” Rachel explained her strategies for getting into “the right frame of mind” for work:

On my way to work, I do the quick scan, and I figure out how I’m feeling. And then, when I get there, I am at work now. And whatever happened in the morning, whatever happened with my kids, screaming and yelling, trying to get everybody out of the house on time. Ok, I forgot lunches; [laughs] whatever happened, it happened, and worrying about that is not going to change my day for the better (laughs). For me, the mindfulness is, *Ok I have to now compartmentalize and switch my attention to school, to these kids. Let's do the school stuff now. Here we are; we are moving onto the next stage of the day.*

Kate provided a compelling case for self-regulation as she recalled an event in which she came to realize that if she wasn’t “listening” to her own emotions, she could have lost the opportunity to connect with a student who needed her. After the last period of a half-day, and right before winter break, Kate realized she had lost her wallet and was “in panic mode.” Kate recalled feeling that she was “just in that limbo of thinking” about what to do next. At that point, a female student stopped Kate and asked her if she knew about “this horrible disease.” Although Kate tried to explain the disease to the student, the situation “completely caught [her] off guard,” since Kate did not know the student, and she also felt that she did not have time for this discussion right then. Kate discussed her response to the situation in relation to her mindful practice, since she had selected this as

an anecdote worth exploring. Kate recalled having a feeling, an intuition, that made her stop and “not respond like that.” She shifted her response from explaining to the student that she could not speak with her right then to staying with the student and letting go of losing her wallet and arriving late to her next job:

I had to check in with myself. I was feeling really panicked...and I acknowledged that, and I just thought, *Pause. I'll just give her a second.* And, as I waited with her...I felt, there's a reason she's bringing this up right now, and she started to talk. And, sure enough, her father, he is suffering from this horrible, horrible disease... We talked about it a little bit... just a conversation, so incredibly heart wrenching. And, you know, at the end, I was like, ‘Can I give you a hug?’ Her friend was waiting, too, and I was like, ‘Oh, can I give you a hug, too?’ [laughs] I gave her a hug.

After Kate relayed this conversation, she was asked to further clarify her perception of how her mindfulness practice impacted that specific interaction. To Kate, the connection was straightforward. “I was able to be there for these students because I created that space for myself and for her and that silence.” Kate summed up the experience by stating, “It’s really about allowing people time.” By relying on her intuition that the moment really mattered to the student, Kate could self-regulate and respond to her in a different way.

These participant narratives explored a wide range of issues teachers face daily in school. To effectively support students, the participants credited their mindfulness practices, e.g., the ability to self-regulate, to create “space,” to “reset,” and to not “personalize” the students’ behavior.

***Through Their Own Signature Mindful Presence, Teachers Create the Overall “Feel” or “Vibe” of a Classroom***

In this theme, the narratives illustrate how mindfulness enables teachers to manage the stress of the day and to be present during their teaching, thus controlling the energy they bring to their classrooms. The participants shared a plethora of tools and techniques for increasing mindful awareness, including activities which they believe shape the overall climate of their classrooms. One significant sub-theme is the participants’ intentions to establish classroom climates in which students feel emotionally supported and academically safe.

For example, Jessica describes her desire to create a classroom with a positive, upbeat vibe. She shared a technique she calls “journaling light,” an activity during which “students track different things they're grateful for or just good things that happened.” On “Feel Good Fridays,” as the students enter the classroom, Jessica plays music. The students quickly adapted to the routine after she introduced it at the beginning of the school year, and, according to Jessica, they enjoy grabbing markers and Post-its and writing down “one thing from the week that they're grateful for, or that was good that happened, or they're looking forward to” and sticking their responses on the bulletin board. Jessica feels it is important for the students to “begin class by writing anything that made them smile a little bit” and “look back and see patterns about what [they] notice and how it feels just to start to keep track of things that are positive.” Jessica noted that “there's so much research about the value of having a gratitude journal,” but she does not want to make it another assignment. Instead, she sees it as “an ongoing invitation” to focus on the positive and set a tone for her classroom.

Becca also prioritizes establishing a positive and welcoming classroom environment and climate at the secondary level. During her interview, she richly described the central role empathy plays in human beings' acceptance of one another and how mindfulness is a foundation for this critically important teacher quality. Becca wants her classroom to feel "like coming home." She admits that although "it sounds hokey, ...it feels a little bit like family" in her class. Becca perceives a benefit to creating a supportive and warm classroom atmosphere. She shared that when "kids walk into [her] classroom...they exhale; they sigh...it's the desk arrangement; it's the decorations, but also, it's being greeted with a smile and knowing you are accepted."

Becca credits her mindful awareness with helping her to create an environment in which everyone is encouraged to respond empathetically and compassionately to one other. For example, even when students are engaging in what may typically be viewed as negative behavior, such as tapping a pencil on the desk, Becca's response is measured. She might issue a gentle, often private, reminder to cue the student to stop tapping on the desk as it is a distraction to others, but it is without judgment. It focuses on the behavior, not on the individual. To further establish a climate of acceptance and support, Becca explicitly communicates her expectations for how students must treat each other, that is, with understanding and empathy. She explains to her students that "if someone comes up to do a speech and can't get one word out [or] someone comes up here and throws up on the floor, ...you're going to feel what that must feel like," since "on another day, that might be you." Her overall message for the students is that "regardless of what happens in the classroom," the students "are here for each other and with each other" because they



“need that sense of safety in order to learn, in order to make mistakes.” In this way, Becca connects a supportive and inclusive climate of the classroom to student learning.

Becca continued to expand on her perception of the ideal classroom culture, again, stressing the importance of meeting students where they are behaviorally and seizing opportunities to build a classroom culture of community. The message she wants her students to receive in her class is that “you're pre-approved,” and that is not because of good grades. The students are accepted even if they “can't sit at a desk,” or “talk too much” or “don't talk enough.”

Becca was asked to connect reflective writing, the technique she mostly turns to during her formal mindfulness practice, to the atmosphere of community, empathy, and acceptance she seeks to create in her classroom. Becca thought for a few moments and did her best to put her thoughts into words. She described the overall perception that “you have to engage in reflection to ultimately accept your own failings, insecurities, vulnerabilities, and faults, which then enables you to accept them in other people and respond with kindness and compassion.” She talked about the importance of self-reflection which allows for identifying “the things about yourself that are insufferable and irritating” when feeling stress or anxiety, so that “you can recognize those in other people, even though it looks different.” This reflection creates an empathetic response to what may otherwise be viewed as student “misbehavior.”

Dave, a special educator, also spoke about the potential for mindfulness practices to build a sense of classroom community, but he expressed the process in different words. As mentioned previously in the findings section of the first research question, Dave described his own mindfulness practice as part of his work life, since he does not

formally practice mindfulness building activities outside of the school day. Dave shared that he brings kindness and gratitude meditations to his students via Calm, a web-based app, which includes different mindfulness meditations.” In Dave’s class, his team and the students “go back and forth from gratitude to loving kindness meditations” that remind the “kids to be kind and loving” and encourage them to focus on “things that they were thankful for today.” For Dave, the benefit to the classroom culture is a consequence of the mindfulness tools and the strategies he practices with his students.

These narratives illustrate the varied paths secondary teachers can take toward introducing mindfulness in their classrooms. Jessica focuses on positivity, while Becca stresses empathy, and Dave’s utilizes kindness, compassion, and gratitude as his point of entry for students.

***Although Mindfulness is an Effective Teacher Tool for Reducing Student Stress, Participants Feel There are Broader Benefits to Be Explored, Including Establishing a Classroom Climate That is Conducive to Learning***

The final theme focuses on the practitioners’ perception that their mindful awareness influences the overall quality of their students’ learning experience. The data show that reducing student stress, while important, is not the only application of mindfulness. In fact, many participants believe that overly framing teacher mindfulness as a tool for managing students’ stress may dissuade teachers and students from engaging in mindfulness practice.

First, teachers may not see the benefit of bringing mindfulness into the classroom if they do not ostensibly see students feeling and acting overwhelmed or anxious. This can be problematic since student stress manifests in different ways, and students’

struggles to cope with school or home life may be present but go unnoticed by teachers. Jessica explains a scenario where “Often, older kids and more compliant kids and more academic students may have stuff going on, and they're really distracted, but they're better at hiding it.” Secondly, when mindfulness is viewed as solely a technique for stress-reduction, students may also be disinterested in mindfulness practice. Jessica counteracts this perception by explaining to her classes that the mindful awareness building strategies offered in class are “not just about them feeling better if they're stressed.” She explains, “I don't want them to walk away from it thinking that's all I can offer them because the kids who aren't experiencing stress, then what now?” According to Jessica, “that’s not a way in for everyone.”

One of Jessica’s objectives in introducing her students to mindfulness is to create a culture in which they recognize the root cause of their stress and anxiety. Jessica tries to “find moments where [she] can help them make connections and see these feelings for themselves.” For example, as part of her routine of handing back an essay or exam, Jessica reads the collective energy in the classroom. She may joke with her students that “it feels like the dementors from Harry Potter are in here, and they just suck your soul!” She and her students laugh. Jessica explained that she uses that moment to say, “I want you just to pause and just to notice you're thinking, what are you thinking right now? What are you feeling in your body, and what are your thoughts around that feeling?” When asked if she could elaborate on what she perceived as the connection between mindfulness and thinking and learning, she responded:

My theory is that a lot of their anxiety comes from the stories they're telling themselves. All kinds of stories about how they did, how people are going to see

them based on how they did. What does this mean for who they are? And, even take it to what kind of person they're going to be...To be honest, it's a really hard narrative to undo, but I think that's one of the things I'm trying to, at least, to introduce to them... This idea of what we think about things often affects our relationship to them.

Jessica recognizes that the atmosphere in a high performing high school may be fraught with academic pressure that translates into how students view themselves, and, within a classroom of high achieving students, that energy can be palpable. To shift the energy, Jessica helps her students see the connection between increased mind awareness and absorbing information. During the focus group, Jessica relayed that she also integrates mindful awareness building activities into her curriculum by telling her students her “purpose for teaching it.” She spends time in class “talking about the importance of teaching ourselves to focus and pay attention and be aware.”

To Jessica, the connection between mindfulness practice and learning motivates her to set aside time at least a few times each week for mindfulness training. As a high school teacher, she has a 40-minute period to cover an extensive curriculum, yet she feels that devoting time to breathing, meditating, and discussing mindfulness with the students is well worth the time lost. She explained that “starting with mindfulness with the kids, it’s working in a way where you’re, quote unquote wasting time up front to save time later.” She elaborated that if she starts “direct instruction or curriculum right away, the bell ringing doesn't mean they're ready to receive it. So, taking these three minutes means that I'm holding the space for them to get to that space where they can learn.”

Similarly, Rachel connects mindfulness to better learning outcomes, and she also “teaches” her students about what Jessica described as “the why.” Specifically, Rachel discusses with her students the connection between learning, shifting negative thinking, and being present in the moment:

Mindfulness, that’s going to help with any thoughts that keep invading your brain from earlier today or yesterday or months ago or things that you’re worried about in the future. It’s going to give you a way to kind of put things on hold. Your time in this room is very short... You can’t let all of these other thoughts beat you up while you’re in here.

Erin also attributes her classroom’s climate of support and mutual respect to the mindfulness work she does with herself and with her students. She explained, “When I do a mindfulness exercise, there’s a change in the buzz in the room. You know, where we get more focused. We get back to one voice at a time and to just giving our attention to one individual,” not that “loud, really loud, collective buzz but, instead, a sense of calm.” She described mindful classrooms as a place where there is a sense of “all of us and each of us,” and she and the students “actually honor each other and the space and the individual moments of the class.” She also shared her perception of the message the students receive from teachers who practice with their students:

I think taking time out of class to do [mindfulness] with my students every day, I think they read that as being a teacher who truly cares about her students. I get that a lot in cards; ‘You care about us. You want me to learn, but you care about just me.’

From Erin's perspective, students "have to be mentally in a place that they're receptive and open to learning, otherwise no learning is happening." Her narrative reveals that mindfulness improves learning in two important ways. First, when students feel cared for, they are in a more "receptive" place. Second, mindfulness improves a student's ability to attend, which, as Erin noted, is critical because a middle school student tends to only have about 12 minutes of focus within a 30-minute period.

### **Research Question 3: Mindful School Culture**

The third research question shifts the study's focus, once again, from the participants' perceptions of how mindfulness is expressed and influences their individual interactions with students to a broader exploration of mindful school culture. What makes a school mindful? What is the potential for mindful schools to positively impact teaching and student learning? What are the barriers, if any, in establishing and maintaining mindful school culture? Through participant narratives, several noteworthy themes surfaced.

First, the participants felt that a mindful school culture is created one classroom and even one conversation at a time. In both their individual interviews and in the focus group, participants described qualities that they associate with a more mindful learning environment. These characteristics include teacher-student interactions that are observably calm, supportive and solution-focused, and collectively create an overall culture which puts students at the center.

A second theme centers around the participants' beliefs that misperceptions create barriers to more teachers bringing mindfulness to their role. However, participants also expressed the belief that these barriers could be largely overcome with information and

support. An additional theme is the teachers' perceptions that getting teacher buy-in is key to any mindfulness initiative a school may take. The final theme is the participants' belief that a culture of mindfulness will organically spread when teachers and students share their positive experiences with it. These themes are explored in the following sections.

***Participants Believe That a Mindful School Culture is Created One Classroom and Even One Conversation at a Time***

A major theme emerged indicating that a mindful school culture does not necessarily have to be established by the administrators or include whole-school initiatives and programs; although several participants noted a mindfulness-themed professional development day as a significant motivator to extend their own practice and/or bring mindfulness to their students. Erin defined a mindful school as basically “a bunch of mindful classrooms” and consequently thought that there “isn't a blueprint or a formula for, I suppose, what it should look like.” Grappling with defining a mindful school culture, Jessica noted that what she sees on websites, “lovely pictures of kids” meditating as a group in a classroom, is not the only reality.

Similarly, Erin is not sure if a mindful school culture is “something that you can visibly see,” but instead believes that people could tell if a specific school was a mindful place by “zooming in on smaller conversations and on individual class dynamics.” To her, “it is just the smaller moments in the classrooms and between the teachers and students anywhere that make up the day. That's it.” This perception held true for each of the focus group participants; daily mindful conversations between faculty and students set the tone and culture of a school building.

When Tess described mindful schools, she also mentioned individual “conversations” and their role in cultivating the tone of the building. Tess shared that she perceives a mindful school as a place of “nurturing...where there's definitely not an urgent tone.” She believes that if people walked around a mindful school, they would pass lots of classrooms in which they could “hear conversations that center on well-being.” In the individual rooms, a person would hear “quieter instruction” and get a sense of “pacing that would never feel rushed.” Her overall perception of what sets a mindful school apart from others is that it is “a place that values rigor but also values and prioritizes supporting students as they move through an academically rigorous day.” This includes, for Tess, a building with a calm and supportive tone.

Rachel’s narratives extended this finding by describing her perceptions of how schools can establish a more supportive tone. To her, mindful schools have a culture that values more than students’ academic achievements. In their classrooms, teachers communicate that they value, or even prioritize, their students’ emotional well-being. Rachel envisions mindful environments as places where students are encouraged to stay balanced and make “healthy choices.” She shared that one of her primary objectives as a secondary teacher is to help her students “make sure that they’re not taking on too many responsibilities. Too many extra things.” Her experience is that students can be “people pleasers at this age, and they want to do all these things and for a lot of reasons.” She has them “slow down and think about that.”

One significant finding was that participants connected mindful school cultures to enhanced learning environments. Tess thinks of a mindful school as an “academically safe space” since “students are not afraid to be wrong,” and “you can say things when



we're not sure if they're correct" because everyone's "opinions are valued." Interestingly, Tess emphasized that this is an understanding on both the part of the teacher and of the student. She clarified, "The teachers and the students know that's part of the learning experience. We don't raise our hand to be right; we raise our hand to explore." In this way, students within a mindful school culture are encouraged to take academic risks, without fear of failure or embarrassment. Becca argued that secondary schools ought to "make space in the curriculum and in the content for kids to become more of who they are and to understand themselves." She explained her belief that, for students, it is crucial for them "to get to know themselves, especially during adolescence."

An integral aspect of building a safe space for adolescents is helping them to manage stress, which, participants feel, should be built into a mindful school's culture. This would entail faculty and staff acknowledging and seeking to counteract the fast pace and heightened stress in secondary buildings. Erin described one classroom approach she believes lessens student stress:

I really liked what Jessica said about kind of settling into the space because I think that's what students really need, especially at the secondary level, because you're going from room to room. You're going from one dynamic in one room to another dynamic in another room, and the hallway is its own dynamic... I think that they need that... to kind of anchor to the space and focus on, 'What are we doing here today?'

Rachel also shared an approach to helping students cope with stress in a way that invites them to recognize and manage their own feelings. When she identifies that there is elevated stress in her classroom, she addresses it directly. "We talk about, 'What are we

going to do? What can we do? Are we going to sit down? Are we going to take a deep breath? Are we going to go to the wellness room?” One of her classroom mindfulness techniques involves using the Hoberman sphere, an expandable geometric toy, to visually encourage students to breathe deeply to calm themselves. She relayed a specific event where she saw this technique used by a student without her direction. “The week before break, one of my quiet, reserved kids just stood up and said, ‘Everybody just needs to stop and take a breath right now,’ and he grabbed it and just ran with it [laughs]. It was amazing because...this is exactly what you want. You want the kids to figure out that the room needs to stop and take a breath.” Rachel’s anecdote suggests that mindful school cultures become internalized by the students who also learn to address stress more proactively.

Rachel expanded on this idea of creating a culture where the students learn strategies that she believes are an outgrowth of mindfulness training, including tools they can use to “regulate their emotions, ...make good ethical decisions, and ...plan out long-term.” She believes that these skills will allow her students to “really get along in society.” Tommy’s narrative further explored this concept of personal empowerment as a characteristic of a mindful school culture from the lens of personal accountability. To illustrate, he picked up on an example Paul discussed in the focus group about an exchange with a student outside of the classroom. Paul described how he set an intention for helping the student to take accountability for his behavior and to create a solution for the behavioral challenge that he was experiencing. Tommy feels that “mindful schools are places where those conversations are the norm,” explaining:

When I walk in these hallways [gestures outside into the hallway], I see teachers having close conversations with students outside of the room, and, Paul, you took that kid out alone, and it wasn't some immediate go-to punitive punishment, some 'Okay, you were doing this, you know, today is detention.' No, you had a conversation with the student, in the moment, about what was going on, and you didn't get all angry with him and focus on punishing. In a mindful school, you would overhear that, [thinks] kind and compassionate conversation.

Understandably, the participants did not provide a concrete definition of mindful schools; however, there was consensus that mindful schools can be identified through a "collective mindset" that addresses more than students' academic needs. In alignment with the Mindfulness Loop, the data suggest that individual classrooms work together to shape the school culture, which, in turn, affects the individual classrooms. This idea will be further explored in chapter five.

***Participants Feel There are Misperceptions about Mindfulness That Create Barriers to More Teachers Bringing Mindfulness into Their Role***

In the critical incident reports, the one-on-one conversations, and in the focus group, participants talked for many hours about the heralds of mindfulness. The participants agreed that mindfulness practices improve the quality of a broad range of experiences for both teacher and student. The discussion begged the question: If mindfulness is valuable, why aren't more secondary teachers incorporating it into their work with adolescents? During the focus group, participants further explored not only how secondary teachers and students benefit from mindfulness, but also why secondary teachers may be reluctant, or even resistant, to bringing mindfulness into the classroom.

These discussions yielded the following insights around the misperceptions that prevent more widespread adoption on the part of teachers and administrators.

These misperceptions include:

- The time integrating mindfulness activities into class would take away from curriculum.
- Teachers need some sort of formal training or personal experience to successfully integrate mindfulness into the classroom.
- Mindfulness is not as relevant at the secondary level.

**Misperception: At the secondary level, there is not enough time to integrate mindfulness into the classroom. However, the participants' narratives suggest that taking the time to bring students through mindfulness exercises maximizes class time.** Jessica perceives a reluctance on the part of teachers to adopt mindfulness practices as, perhaps, connected to the specialized and increasingly difficult content at the secondary level. She expressed:

Secondary teachers can be very tied to their content...they teach because they love their subject. Nothing is more important to them than that particular subject, talking about that subject and getting the students through that subject. This is what matters to them.

With only 40-minute periods to cover their curriculum, teachers may be averse to giving up time to non-curricular activities. Erin also believes that secondary teachers in general may be less open to teaching mindfulness in the classroom because of the time it requires. She turned to Jessica and added her own thoughts:

I agree; it's not necessarily teachers having an opposition to mindfulness. I think a lot of secondary teachers, at least from my experience, really do see the benefits, but I think it's a tough sell to secondary educators. It's just that one more thing to add onto an already overloaded plate, that perception that if I start class with mindfulness, now there's even less time to spend on my curriculum.

Tess summed up this barrier well when she explained that “high school teachers in particular...want to provide that knowledge base, and it goes back to always feeling like there aren't enough hours in the day for the things we already want to get across to the kids... now more to cover? But, I think, what they do not realize is that without clarity of mind, nothing they teach will resonate in the way it would land in a mindful classroom.”

Based on the findings of the second research question which explored teachers' perceptions about the benefits of mindfulness in their own work, the data suggest that participants believe the time they spend on mindfulness practices pays dividends. Rather than seeing it as squandering precious minutes they could be spending on teaching curriculum, they view it as an essential tool for effective teaching.

**Misperception: Teachers need some sort of formal training or personal experience to integrate mindfulness into the classroom. However, the participants' narratives suggest that mindfulness practices are flexible in both time and form.**

Erin offered the perspective that it's even “a tougher sell” when teachers believe “it's another thing to learn when you aren't already familiar with it.” Tess confirmed this finding:

I think some teachers think they don't know enough about the topic themselves, but they do [smiles]. There are so many different tools and techniques.

Tommy chimed in, adding to the conversation about common misperceptions about mindfulness:

Even the word mindfulness is used so much and has become so monetized, and I wonder if maybe that's a hindrance for some people. I know I don't always like to use that word as much, and when I approach a conversation with a colleague about mindfulness, or I'm explaining what's happening with me or with the kids, I approach it more from a technical point. I explain it's a moment that we're taking a breath, where we're taking a pause, or whatever it happens to be. More than 'This is mindfulness, and this is the program that I'm doing.'

Picking up on Tommy's thoughts that mindfulness has become commercialized, several participants set up an alternative view and described mindfulness as a practice that can be cultivated gradually and does not necessarily require formal training. According to Rachel, other teachers may mistakenly think "that it's so much extra work" and may be resistant to bringing mindfulness into their classrooms, since they believe they don't have the time to invest" in learning how to present mindfulness to their students.

Most of the participants agreed that mindfulness practices can take many forms. Several spoke of mindfulness practice as a way of approaching a particular moment, a tuning into one's self and into others and then responding to students in a focused, often more understanding and empathetic, way. Similarly, many participants described their "formal" mindfulness practice as a technique they use to develop their ability to be mindful in the moment. Although several participants have what they think of as a "formal" mindfulness practice, such as taking a yoga class every Monday night,

all participants spoke of fitting “mindful moments” into both their workday and outside of their workday.

As a secondary teacher, Rachel understands that time can be a factor when developing a routine around mindfulness. She spoke about a message she tries to send to other teachers about the flexibility of mindfulness. She explains to them that a teacher “could just spend a minute before walking into the school building and check in.” She suggests that before teachers begin their day, they “do a quick body scan from head to toe or wiggle your toes before you leave the car.” She recommends “walking to the door, just a quick rainbow walk to check for different colors.” Most importantly, Rachel encourages teachers to not “...listen to the radio for the debrief on how the world is burning before you get on the turnpike” since that is “not going to help the brain. Instead, do a quick set up for the day and tell yourself, *This is what I want to go really well today.*”

Rachel also explained that since she began practicing mindfulness outside of the school day, she begins her day much earlier, carving out “at least 15-20 minutes in the morning when nobody's awake except for [her] and the dogs.” She elaborated on her morning practice which she characterized as an “informal” experience when she is washing fruit and preparing her children’s and her own lunch. As Tommy does, Rachel recognizes the importance of arriving at school in a calm, relaxed state. She spoke of fitting time for her mindfulness into the school day by simply going for a quick walk. Although many teachers take walks between periods, Rachel believes the difference is the intention she sets for the walk. Rachel shared one of her favorite strategies: the rainbow walk, a loop around the building where she looks for the different colors of the

rainbow and keeps track in her mind when she spots the different colors. In a short amount of time, Rachel clears her mind and recharges her energy. She described:

So, rather than going on, like, a mental venting walk [laughs], you know, a walk where I think like, *This is too much; I can't believe I got that email* or *There's just way too much on my plate*, now I want to actually be on the walk and enjoy the walk. I've tried, and I'm trying, to constantly retrain my brain. Always. So, yes, those other thoughts can come in, sure, and we can acknowledge them, but I'm trying to walk. I'm trying to enjoy the outdoors right now.

Becca's perceptions supported the theme that mindfulness does not necessarily involve teacher training but, instead, leverages the techniques that fit in with a teacher's comfort level, preference, and personal experience. She spoke about how she taps into her own and her students' mindfulness with a method aligned with her own experiences as a writer. For her, mindfulness is synonymous with self-reflection, and her mindfulness practice lends itself to the form of reflective journaling. This includes her own journaling outside of her professional work and the journaling she helps her students practice during class. Becca believes that this method of mindfulness practice "is available to everyone." In her interview, Becca explained how instead of taking extra time or engaging in special mindfulness training, she connects mindfulness practice to work she is already doing with students. "We need to write things down in order to process how we're feeling. There's an opportunity there." What makes the activity, whether it takes the form of walking or writing, mindful is the intention the practitioner sets behind it.

To gain greater buy-in from her students and to establish the "right tone in the classroom," Becca is very explicit with students at the beginning of the year about the



benefit she sees from mindful, reflective journaling. Becca recalled that she “gives [the students] reflective pieces right away about what writing can do for a person, to almost sell it to them, especially the ones that might be skeptical.” Becca noted that “everyone can expand their thinking if you give yourself, or you’re given, time and space to be reflective and to be mindful.”

Erin had an additional suggestion for how teachers might integrate mindfulness into an already packed day, without devoting additional time to training for mindfulness in schools. She enjoys the convenience, availability, and manageable time commitment of mindfulness training via the app, Calm. Erin reported enjoying the “flexibility of the program,” since it allows the user to adjust the usage time and the content. Users can engage in mindfulness meditation centered on topics such as focus, relaxation, and energy, among others, for a duration of time ranging from five minutes to an hour. Personally, she uses the app to strengthen focus, to reduce anxiety, and to improve sleep. What she finds particularly valuable about the app is the fact that whenever she completes one course, “there's always kind of something else that strikes” her as an important next step. Erin has even “repeated courses because things hit you in different ways at different times, and, so what you need at one point, right, even a month or two later, you know, something else might resonate that you didn't catch the first time.” For her, mindfulness practice is a pathway to continuous growth in many areas of her life, and there is always “something to work on.” Erin appreciates that Calm offers a broad range of activities that build mindful awareness, including a simple one-minute mindful moment she can do alone or with her students.

From the participants' perspectives, mindfulness practices, though they may take a few minutes of classroom time, pay dividends in terms of increased focus on the part of students. Furthermore, many mindfulness practices do not require formal training, and they can be easily integrated into one's daily routine.

**Misperception: Mindfulness is more relevant at the elementary school level.** However, participants' narratives suggest that secondary students' significant academic and social-emotional needs could be addressed through mindfulness practice. One of the most significant cross-participant findings was the assertion that secondary students need mindful teachers and exposure to mindfulness strategies as much as, and in some ways even more than, younger students. The participants talked about the collision between added academic stress, social pressure, and a flooding of hormones. The participants also spoke of increasing secondary student buy-in by approaching mindfulness in an academic, brain-based way that, perhaps, younger students do not have the maturity to understand. Across-participants, this capacity for understanding the science behind mindfulness was perceived as a noteworthy advantage of teaching mindfulness to older students.

Rachel explained why she perceives a need to teach students about mindfulness and to teach them, specifically, about the brain science behind it. She believes that in high-performing schools, such as the one in which she teaches:

We have a high population of students who, on a daily basis, are experiencing anxiety...And not just I'm worried about grades, but some of these kids have diagnosed anxiety and go to therapists and go to our school-based counselors, so,

yea, we need to teach them more about their brain. I feel personally compelled to really dig into that part of it so that they understand how it works...

To illustrate how Rachel integrates mindfulness and brain-based research, she shared a typical classroom conversation in which she empathizes with the students' stress and anxiety and explains to them what is happening in their bodies when they experience these difficult feelings. She encourages her students to pause and think about how they might feel better:

I say, your brain is like, 'Hey, now I'm going to release all these hormones, and you're going to have a really bad stomach ache, and you're going to want to leave the room, or you're going to zone out, and you're gonna start freaking out.' I go through with them, why does this biological process take place? And then I ask, 'What are the steps we could take at that moment?' And, that part, that's about being mindful and present. What are the strategies that we could use?

Rachel's belief that mindfulness is important on the secondary school level is based on the elevated stress levels she sees in her students. She wants to provide her students with effective ways to cope, via strategies that she characterizes as "mindful approaches."

During the focus group, Jessica also shed light on why secondary teachers and students benefit from mindfulness. She wondered whether secondary teachers "should try to be even more present and in tune with the kids because we only get that snapshot of the students since we only see them for 40 minutes." In comparison, "when you are with younger kids, you're more in tune with a kid's entire day, what has happened so far that day and maybe what they walked in dealing with."

Participants argued for continuing at the secondary level the mindfulness that many students were “brought up with in elementary school,” as Tess mentioned. Jessica summed up their overall perception, arguing that at the high school level, “Yes, we have content, really difficult content sometimes, and, so, of course, that's a big part of the classroom conversation, but, hey, we have people in front of us [laughs].” The participants also theorized that at the elementary school level, teachers may know the families more and have more context for understanding student emotions.

Participants set forth a strong case for mindfulness in secondary schools given the added pressures students face as they navigate middle school and high school. In general, participants suggested that students would benefit from additional coping skills.

***Participants Feel That Getting Teacher Buy-In is Key to Any Mindfulness Initiatives a School May Take.***

When the conversation moved to the role administrators could play in creating mindful schools, Tommy wondered if mindfulness should be formalized and required for teachers. He said, “Honestly, I don't know if that would be going against the spirit of what mindfulness is trying to achieve.” He expressed a concern that it might even be “counterproductive” if the teachers “don't really believe in what they're saying.” Erin extended Tommy's concern that when “somebody doesn't really buy into [mindfulness, when]... being forced or strongly encouraged to teach it,” the students might be “less likely to be open to a different experience later or less likely to come to it to themselves later.” Instead, she suggests meeting teachers “where they are at that moment.” She wondered the impact of “forcing a mindfulness practice on a district or a class or even a

student, whatever level” and if that decision would take “the individuality out of the relationship with that student or that colleague.”

Erin suggested “that to successfully present mindfulness to educators, for it to really truly work, it has to first come almost like self-care.” Erin believes that “teachers need to hear that they have to take care of their own well-being.” From her perspective, self-care is important for more than just a teacher’s health:

...if you want to be there for your students and have them be receptive to you and be available for them, then...you have to be present...If your plate is full and you feel overwhelmed, no. That’s not it [laughs]. With mindfulness, I have plenty to give. I can give to my students, and if I’m not taking care of myself, and I’m not handling my stress, then I’m not going to be available as a teacher in the way that I necessarily could be and should be for my students.

Framing the integration of mindfulness in terms of self-care picks up on the themes from the first research question which examined how people turn to mindfulness while at a crossroads, in response to traumatic events, and/or to shift patterns in thought or behaviors, and it provides a bridge to introduce mindfulness to the broader teaching community in a middle school or a high school setting.

The group’s consensus was that buy-in is key to any mindfulness initiatives a school may undertake, with the caution that it cannot be forced on people. Rather, people have to be met where they are in their own mindful awareness, and it was suggested that mindfulness should be framed as an opportunity for teacher “self-care.”

***Participants Believe That a Culture of Mindfulness Will Organically Spread When Teachers and Students Share Their Positive Experiences with It.***

One interesting finding that emerged is that mindful teachers and their students spread the idea of mindfulness throughout a building. Jessica brought up this idea during the focus group when participants spoke about how mindfulness takes root in the culture of a school. She shared with the group that from her experience, the students carry mindfulness over from class to class. When she first integrated mindfulness into her daily teaching, other teachers approached her. They communicated that “students were talking about this, and the teachers were interested... [smiles] They wanted to know more about it.”

Jessica recalled a specific example when she had the opportunity to see the positive impact of the mindfulness she was leading in her classroom extend beyond her four walls. Her colleague had shared with Jessica that a mutual student came into his class one day and said that the best part of her day was when she did the mindful minute in Jessica’s class. According to Jessica, the colleague had responded to the student, “What, that’s the best part of your day? I can do that for you.’ And you know what, he did!” She heard from the students that her colleague had started doing mindful minutes in his room. The students received a cumulative benefit of experiencing mindfulness in more than one 40-minute period each day.

In hearing Jessica’s story during the focus group, Tommy noted, “I think the contagion between faculty is spreading mindfulness!” To further illustrate Tommy’s point, Jessica pointed at Tommy and told the group that he “came in to see me a few days ago...and said, ‘Have I ever talked to you about Tara Brach?’ And he recommended her

podcast, and I listened and then I bought two of her books.” Jessica framed the “contagion” by explaining, “Because the teachers, and it’s not a big group, we talk about it; we kind of build our own little community that way.” Their anecdotes suggest that smaller teacher circles that sprout up organically offer support, inspiration, and information about mindfulness.

Erin added to the conversation about focusing greater attention on mindfulness at a building level. Participants were asked to explore whether creating physical spaces where mindfulness activities are available (i.e., yoga mats, chimes, and meditation scripts) are necessary or even effective in generating more teacher and student interest. Erin offered her perspective:

I think you don't need to have a designated mindfulness space because I think it can be the educator tendency to be like, ‘If we're going to do this initiative, we need materials; we need resources.’ And I think if you're truly doing mindfulness practices just in your classroom, you don't really need... a Zen garden...a salt lamp or...a diffuser. It's in your head, you know, and I think if you're using those practices in your classroom and in your school, then you might not necessarily need a designated spot. It's more about the attitude.

Jessica saw it differently, arguing instead that “having the [mindfulness] space validates it in a way, gives the message that this is something we as a school support and believe in.” Although Erin and Jessica disagreed on this point, they did concur that mindfulness is a mindset that can be developed with the right support.

## Conclusion

The participants' narratives support the idea that mindfulness can be understood as both a state of mind and as an actionable behavior. As mentioned in the previous sections, the researcher continuously heard the participants characterize their practices as both something they actively did, such as meditation, yoga, reflective journaling, and contemplative walking, as well as a feeling or experience they were having, as in a sense of calm, less judgment, and attunement to another person's emotions. Additionally, at times, participants attempted to tease out whether particular experiences were examples of being mindful or aspects of their personalities.

Based on participant responses, teacher mindful awareness seems to exist on two levels: the teacher's own internal state characterized by a calm, centered, focused attention to the present moment and the teacher's attempt to embed these same qualities in their interactions with students. In general, the participants found it critical for a teacher to be able to quickly and appropriately respond to student needs, especially in high-stress secondary environments.

Ultimately, the general perception of the participants is that teacher mindfulness matters. Mindful attention slows the teacher down long enough to focus attention on students, which leads to less reactive and more compassionate interactions with students. For the teacher participants, stretching the time between the stimulus, which often takes the form of a student's behavior, and the teacher's response is key. Mindfulness is more than being a nice, kind, or even good teacher. To the participants, mindfulness is characterized by intentionality. Mindful awareness is, as Erin noted, keeping the relationship with students in the front of the mind, and, when the priority shifts away



from the students' learning and overall well-being, noticing that shift and "resetting." The participants maintain that teacher mindful presence creates emotionally and academically safe places, thereby lowering stress, encouraging academic risk-taking, and equipping students with important life skills, such as taking personal accountability and engaging in solution-focused thinking.

Participants also agreed that teachers will be unable to best support students if they are not taking care of themselves at the same time. Data suggest that most participants turned to mindfulness in response to a crossroads, a difficult period, or a desire to shift thought or behavioral patterns in their personal lives; as a result, they are positioned to recognize when students struggle with internal and external pressures and empathetically respond. Additionally, the participants' narratives suggest that mindfulness is worthwhile for all students, regardless of their stress levels, because of its capacity to increase student attention and focus and to set the stage for learning. Although several participants shared experiences of valuable, inspiring, and informative professional development, their narratives also suggest that mindfulness is accessible to all teachers, with a broad array of tools and strategies from which to choose.

Further, the participants believe that, as practitioners, they are instrumental in educating colleagues and students about the positive outcomes associated with mindfulness and that this process can contribute to calm, nurturing, secondary schools that optimize learning and communicate genuine care and concern for students. Viewed collectively, the narratives suggest that teacher mindfulness awareness can positively influence teacher-student relationships and classroom climate and ought to be framed as an integral part of a school's culture.

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

*“Where you are understood, you are home.”*  
 ~ *Anam Cara: A Book of Celtic Wisdom*, (O’Donahue, 1997, p. 14)

The current study explored three fundamental research inquiries:

1. How do secondary educators perceive the origins of their mindfulness practices?
2. How do secondary educators perceive the connection between their contemporary mindfulness practice and their critical role as a secondary teacher?
3. What do secondary teachers perceive is the influence of mindfulness on school culture, and what barriers do they perceive in establishing mindful schools?

Chapter 1 provided a rationale for the study: extant research both reveals increasing levels of student academic and emotional stress and suggests that positive teacher-student relationships have a salient effect on classroom learning and the general welfare of students. Chapter 2 provided a review of mindfulness research, the increasing needs of secondary students, and the critical role of secondary teachers in students’ overall well-being. Chapter 3 discussed the study’s purpose, the research design, and the data collection and analysis methods. Chapter 4 presented research findings in narrative form. Chapter 5 is also presented as an integrated narrative that includes an interpretation

of the findings through the theoretical and conceptual frameworks, as well as some important connections to prior research. Additionally, the study is placed within a larger context. Within the separate discussions of the research questions' findings, two essential issues are explored:

- What are the findings' implications for the field?
- How might the data support educational leaders as they design and implement mindfulness programs for teachers and students?

The chapter concludes with a discussion of study limitations related to design and a final researcher's reflection.

### **Interpretation of Findings**

In the previous chapter, rich, detailed descriptions were provided to illuminate the qualities and characteristics of mindfulness practitioners in their roles as secondary educators. Each of the nine participants' narratives served to explore and illustrate the complexities of mindfulness and the influence of teacher presence on students. What emerged from this study is that participants came to mindfulness for a myriad of reasons and practice it in varied ways. As a result, the entry points for mindfulness with students reflects each practitioner's unique relationship with it. For one secondary teacher, to practice mindfulness is to be grateful; for another teacher, practice is to engage in formal meditation. The unifying factor is that the participants are passionate about mindfulness for its ability to enhance their own work as secondary educators as well as their students' academic growth and emotional well-being.

### ***Origins and Development of Mindfulness Practices***

As the researcher explored the genesis and style of teachers' mindfulness and their practice of it, several key themes surfaced which have larger implications for research and practice. Most participants came to mindfulness in response to an event that they defined as stressful or overwhelming. This group of participants credited mindfulness as being instrumental in their ability to cope and recover from challenging periods in their lives. Additionally, the data revealed that most participants have continued to utilize their practice not only to counteract negative experiences, but also to find greater joy and satisfaction in both their personal and work lives.

In general, the participants came to embrace mindfulness with the idea of self-care. Mindfulness allows them to, as Erin noted, put on their "own oxygen mask first," which is an important foundation of mindfulness since "you can't pour from an empty cup." This idea of "self-care" has important implications for the field: framing teacher mindfulness as a strategy for mitigating teacher stress and reducing professional burnout symptoms may lead to a wider scale integration of mindfulness programs within secondary schools. Implications here include the need for leadership to commit time and resources for mental health awareness. Although teachers are routinely trained to recognize risk factors for depression, anxiety, and suicide risk in their students, there is also a need for teachers to recognize and remedy risk factors in themselves. One suggestion is for dedicating space within department and faculty meetings for teachers to share this more vulnerable aspect of the profession, in hopes that colleagues and supervisors may support and educate those who are struggling to cope with the demands of teaching. Furthermore, in the case of schools with mindfulness practitioners,

leadership might consider providing a platform to share strategies that may be of help to other teachers who are struggling in their personal and/or professional lives.

It should also be noted that the participants do not limit themselves to their early form of mindfulness practice, but rather see mindfulness more holistically and continue to build their repertoire of techniques and classroom strategies for integrating mindfulness. This is where building leadership comes into play. To spark interest and build capacity in teachers, leadership should provide access to an array of research-based practices, via staff professional development or credited in-service opportunities. Leadership might also look to local school districts that are effectively implementing mindfulness and arrange for classroom visitations. In this way, teachers can hear first-hand from practitioners outside of their daily teaching world who have seen academic and social-emotional growth in students and credit mindfulness for this progress.

Of further significance for field application is the data that suggest that the entry point for mindfulness is expansive; secondary teachers can successfully integrate mindfulness in ways which they are comfortable and familiar. In the focus group, participants perceived a potential barrier to broadening the reach of mindfulness as the (mis)perception that helping students strengthen their mindfulness awareness requires training and/or even expertise. However, these findings suggest that authentic avenues of delivery, unique to the teacher's experience and comfort level, might be supported and explored for greater teacher buy-in. This may require a slower rollout of mindfulness and a leveling of mindfulness training. Teachers who already work in the mindfulness space can find challenge, and those who are new to the concept can enter on the ground level in a way that feels manageable to them. Building leaders may determine this level of

comfort and expertise via survey or informal discussions at the department level. More importantly, teachers need the message that they can pursue practices that feel authentic to them and to their personalities, interests, and abilities. For example, yoga might be alluring to one person, while exploring ways to highlight gratitude may be of interest to another.

***Benefits of Mindfulness Related to Teachers' Internal State, Teacher-Student Relationships and Classroom Culture***

To further understand how teachers' mindfulness practices influence their internal state, relationships with students and classroom culture, the researcher returned to the foundational theoretical frameworks of ecological systems of human development and interpersonal neurobiology. The researcher also looked to The Mindfulness Loop, a conceptual framework she developed to better understand how and to what extent students are influenced by their teachers, and by the broader environments of the classroom and school. The researcher interpreted the data collected during each of the three study phases through these three frameworks to compare what participants were describing to what the existing literature suggests. For example, participants' perceptions of how their students' and their own energy influence the climate of the classroom seemed to reinforce Siegel's theory (2007; 2010) of how relationships are shaped through mirror neuroning and neurobiological attunement. Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory (1997) was equally helpful in interpreting the data by viewing teacher anecdotes through the lens of nested theory. For instance, it became clear early on in the data collection that the participants did not view themselves as working in silos; rather, they saw themselves as part of an interconnected system. Participants openly and

honestly shared their experiences to suggest that mindfulness does not flow in one direction from teacher practitioner to student, but is, instead, a fluid, dynamic, and complex exchange between teachers and their students, students and their peers, and the separate classrooms that form a collective school. In particular, the conceptual framework enabled the researcher to explore the following:

- how teachers become attune to students
- how interactions between teacher and students, and in some instances, students to students, create climate within a classroom setting
- how these influences both shape and are shaped by school culture

Looking at the themes in the collective, the findings suggest that participants perceive their mindfulness practice as fostering change both within their own internal state and in the way that they show up to their work as secondary teachers. Participants also feel that intentionality is the essence of mindful teaching. In fact, participants repeatedly spoke of preparing themselves for interactions and conversations with students and for their workday in general. This preparation often took the form of meditating, practicing yoga, or even taking a quick, mindful walk. As previously noted, for this group of secondary educators, one of the most critical intentions is to effectively manage the hectic pace of the secondary school setting, which requires both students and teachers to transition every 40 minutes and to tackle new curriculum within a new physical environment and with an entirely new group of people.

Having listened to extensive anecdotes of teachers' interactions with their students, it seems that participants credit mindfulness with reminding them to hold back, to reflect, and, hopefully, to make more thoughtful decisions throughout the workday.

Specifically, participants noted that the space they create between stimulus and response, which they consistently referred to as “a pause,” allows them to gauge their own internal state, often at an unconscious level, and to read the emotional state of their students.

This perception is in line with Shapiro’s three axioms of mindfulness model (2006). With their awareness of self and of others, participants noted a connection between their mindfulness practice and the ability to simultaneously attend to themselves and to their students in a compassionate, non-judgmental, and calm way. In addition to the mindfulness axiom of intention, Shapiro’s model (2006) also includes an axiom for *how* to attend, which he refers to as the “attitudinal foundations of mindfulness” (p. 237). In alignment with this theory, teacher participants also spoke of the qualities and characteristics they bring to the act of paying attention. In other words, the participants spoke of what they perceive as benefits of compassionate and kind interactions with students. As noted in Chapter 4, one important finding that emerged in this study was the teachers’ belief in the importance of keeping the ego in check so as not to over-personalize and perhaps overreact to student behaviors. These findings reflect what the literature already indicates about the importance of attuned relationships. Specifically, the participants’ narratives support Weare’s (2014) research that mindfulness practitioners display greater attunement to individual student’s needs, and, therefore, engage in more caring and supportive interpersonal relationships.

A less expected finding in this study was that teachers’ mindfulness practice origins continue to influence their interactions with students. For example, having benefited from mindfulness, participants expressed confidence in the ability of mindfulness to help their students cope with challenges and feel better prepared to handle



adversity. As noted, some participants were drawn to mindfulness in response to feeling an imbalance in their own lives, particularly as they juggled home and teaching responsibilities. The findings suggest that their own history of feeling overwhelmed and unbalanced positioned them to recognize their students' struggles within a high-pressure setting and serve as significant motivation to integrate the formal teaching of mindfulness in their classroom, hoping that mindfulness could be of value.

While participants' view a reduction in stress as an important benefit to students as well as to themselves, they also see mindful awareness and practice as having much broader applications for student learning and discipline. In their experience, mindfulness practices in the classroom have improved students' ability to focus on the rigorous curriculum at the secondary level, to persevere in the face of difficult academic tasks, and to more deeply engage during class lessons. Some participants specifically pointed to a reduction in uncooperative student behavior. In these scenarios, according to the narratives, the teachers' mindful presence informed the way they approached students and how they view challenging situations. In other words, as teachers pause and take inventory before they react, they are better positioned to invite students into solution-focused conversations where the objective of the interaction between student and teacher is not to punish or to communicate disappointment in the student, but rather to get at the root cause of the student's behavior, support the student, and then move the student toward solving their own problems. A school with a culture of mindfulness, it was noted during the focus group, would have these calm, solution-focused conversations happening all the time, both informally in the hallway and more formally at larger staff meetings. Again, Bronfenbrenner's conception of separate nests as influencing students is

relevant. Teachers embody the school culture and bring those values, beliefs, and traditions into their separate classrooms.

This finding has significant implications for classroom climate. Three participants shared anecdotes in which the emphasis of conversations with students shifted away from asking, *What did you do?* to asking, *What will you do?* This results in what the participants perceived as a more important and positive outcome. The data point to the benefits for mindfulness to address student challenges at a building level. If there is an intervention in the classroom, there may be a diminished need for discipline at the next level; e.g., the need for a referral to the dean of students. In this way, when leadership invests in promoting teacher mindfulness training, they build protective factors that prevent student behavioral challenges from escalating.

It's important to note that through their narratives, several participants highlighted that their approach is not "soft" and that teachers who are "into mindfulness" don't let kids get away with poor behavior in the name of emotional support. Rather, their clear, present focus allows their students some time to pause and reflect and then creates space for students to become accountable for their actions and take part in the resolution, even if the plan is as simple as moving a seat from the back to the front of the room. Findings such as these indicate that utilizing mindfulness has broad implications for school and classroom practice beyond being a tool for relaxation and stress reduction (Mendelson et al., 2010). Teachers would benefit from information connecting mindfulness to restorative practices (Bluth et. al, 2016), which shifts the focus from punishment to repairing relationships damaged from student conflict.

Additionally, the findings were further interpreted through the Mindfulness Loop construct, it was noticed that the teacher participants recognize the influence of their mindfulness practice on the overall “vibe” of the classroom. Participants inherently understand that the energy they bring to the room flows alongside the information they relay to students, which, in turn, influences the microsystem of each student in class and feeds back into the teacher’s own microsystem as well. Their own mindfulness practice, as well as the mindfulness practices participants opt to do with students, helps to manage this energy flow and to create a more positive classroom environment. Another noteworthy finding was that the participants felt that even when some students did not participate in the mindfulness activities, for example, did not close their eyes or take that collective deep breath, the students still seemed to positively benefit from the change in the classroom atmosphere. The implication is that mindfulness both directly and indirectly benefits students as it sets the tone for the classroom whether students are actively engaged in the specific mindfulness strategy or not. Building leadership and teachers could be made aware of this finding. Specifically, they need not worry if certain students opt out as the overall benefits will contribute to a more positive classroom.

### ***School-wide Benefits of Mindfulness***

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems theory (1997) was particularly helpful in interpreting the findings of the third research question, which explored the benefits of and the barriers to creating more mindful secondary schools. Data suggest that from an ecological systems perspective, the fluid and fast paced nature of secondary schools means that teachers and students move from group to group throughout the day, thereby entering microsystems within the broader microsystem of the school itself. One is

constantly influencing the other as teachers and students interact and develop relationships over time and across academic boundaries (e.g. in clubs, on sports teams, etc.). Therefore, taking a more macro view of mindfulness would help complete the circle of understanding of secondary teacher's perceptions of mindfulness and its impact. This, in turn, would help inform the practices and policies of secondary schools, notably in high-performing, high-pressure school districts such as the two featured in this study.

In Bronfenbrenner's (1997) view, the participants understand their place within students' microsystems, a nest which holds the teacher to student interactions, and student to student exchanges as well. The participants further situate their role, including individual teaching assignments and classroom setting, within a larger school context, recognizing the role administrators play in creating and sustaining mindful education. From Bronfenbrenner's perspective, the overall school culture influences the students' microsystems. Therefore, the extent to which the school embraces the principles of mindfulness significantly impacts teachers and students alike. Although the participants did not use the language of human development ecology, each participant spoke of the advantages and burdens of being a part of a larger system. At turns, participants spoke of the importance of providing students with "calm," "nurturing," and "emotionally and academically safe" environments. Yet, several participants also reflected on students bringing energy with them from class to class, including negative stress and more positive mindful awareness. As the participants openly and honestly shared their experiences, it came to light that mindfulness does not flow in one direction from teacher practitioner to student, but is, instead, a fluid, dynamic, and complex exchange. Recognizing this interconnectedness could be a pivotal breakthrough for school

administrators looking to lower stress and anxiety within its culture at large. The dialogue around and understanding of this interconnectedness should be part of a larger, on-going conversation.

Participants also reported perceived support of administrators and slow but sure movement toward a whole-school mindful approach that values not only students' academic achievement but also their emotional health and positive interpersonal relationships. For example, four participants spoke of the same professional day during which a presenter discussed his mindfulness journey, inspiring them to continue on their journey and lean more fully into mindfulness with their students. Indeed, the right programming seems to make a difference. Where they found more consistent support, however, was amongst colleagues who were also mindfulness practitioners (e.g., sharing resources, experiences, etc.). The implications of this finding tie to John Hattie's research (2012) that when there is trust between teachers, sharing becomes the norm. Teachers collectively can make a difference, since effective teachers look to fill each other's gaps; however, the cumulative effects of teachers supporting and stretching other teachers can be realized only when a school's culture values, prioritizes, and clears space for collaboration. Leadership might look to support these important and organic networks of information and application sharing in a way that does not burden the specific mindfulness practitioners, but looks to praise, capture, and distribute their knowledge for broader use.

Finally, data suggest one additional potential barrier: insufficient time in an already packed curriculum and school day to implement mindfulness in secondary schools. Understanding this finding has important implications for the field. Participants

shared the perception that while educators in their building are supportive of mindfulness in general, they are challenged to find time in their 40-minute periods to lead their classes in activities that build mindful awareness. The participants agreed that secondary teachers are often concerned about “covering the curriculum,” since their students are required to take many high-stakes tests, including Regents exams, AP exams, and the SAT/ACT. Participants agreed, however, that although counterintuitive, delivering mindfulness instruction can maximize instructional time. This has implications for school leaders who would like to implement mindfulness practices on a broader school that dovetail with how the school day is structured and developing an awareness of the benefit of putting the time in upfront for greater attention on the part of students.

### **Relationship to Prior Research**

Researchers Flook, Goldberg, Pinger, Bonus, and Davidson (2013) conducted a study on mindfulness for teachers since “while mindfulness training has been identified as a promising means for cultivating attention and reducing stress, little research has investigated this approach with teachers and its impact on their professional role” (p. 185). The 18 participants in the Flook et al. (year) study were selected from four elementary schools in a Midwestern city. Researchers explored whether mindfulness could be associated with lowered teacher stress and burnout. The current study adds to the literature by including the perspective of secondary teachers in an inquiry that examines the influence of mindfulness on teacher-student relationships. The data from the current study corroborates the findings from Flook et. al that mindfulness lowers teacher stress. The current study also adds to the body of research by investigating how mindfulness influences teachers’ interpersonal relationships with students.

The present study also extends the findings of Schussler, Jennings, Sharp, and Frank (2015). In their 2015 study, the researchers' aim was to determine whether a specific mindfulness intervention for teachers, Cultivating Awareness and Resilience in Education (CARE), had a salient effect on individuals who completed the program. Specifically, the researchers were interested in whether the intervention affected the teacher's self-awareness, and/or physical and emotional health. To explore this connection, researchers gathered qualitative data from four focus groups of three to eight participants each. Results suggest that teachers develop greater self-awareness and an improved ability to become less emotionally reactive.

The data collected throughout this study also corroborates findings in mindfulness theory. One consistent finding in this study is the perception that the participants' mindfulness practice allows them to be in the moment with their students. According to Daniel Siegel (2007), "attending to the richness of our here-and-now experiences, creates scientifically recognized enhancements...in our interpersonal relationships" (p. xiii). Mindful awareness for teachers does indeed appear to deepen their presence in the classroom. It allows them to more fully attend to students' needs and to control their reactions to classroom experiences.

Additionally, previous research suggested that mindfulness can help teachers cope in stressful classroom environments and interact with their students with more awareness, acceptance, and emotion regulation (Becker, Gallagher & Whitaker, 2017). In stressful situations, mindfulness practitioners display greater attunement to individual student's needs, and, therefore, engage in more caring and supportive interpersonal relationships (Weare, 2014). As evidenced in teacher narratives, participants in this study support the

notion that mindfully aware teachers feel better equipped to respond calmly, intentionally, and proactively in stressful situations (Becker et al., 2017). Overall, the secondary educators in the present study perceive their mindfulness as facilitating a positive teacher-learner connection.

A recent association has also been identified between mindfulness practices and the qualities and characteristics of effective teachers, namely “attention, empathy, emotional regulation and affect tolerance” (Shapiro, Rechtschaffen & de Sousa, 2016, p. 83). This study corroborates that connection, as participants reported that their mindfulness practices gave them the capacity to pause, redirect their thinking, and respond to students, even when the students were engaged in negative behaviors, in accepting and non-judgmental ways. Roeser et al. (2012) maintain that a teacher’s day is filled with interactions that require teachers to not only shift their focus from whole class to individual students but also to remain emotionally regulated as they respond. Each participant noted that their mindfulness practice allowed them to focus on the present moment and to shift from moment-to-moment more effectively, leading to more supportive and nurturing interactions with students and to a calm classroom in which students feel capable and cared for by their teachers. This study’s findings align with literature in suggesting that mindfulness is beneficial to establishing and maintaining positive teacher-student relationships.

Furthermore, in several studies, strong positive connections between students and teachers have been linked to increased student learning. Outcomes include improvement in student performance on year-end standardized achievement tests, indicating that improving teacher-student relationships has the potential to directly enhance student



learning (Allen et al., 2013). The current study adds to the discourse by providing data that suggest the potential for mindfulness to bolster teacher-student relationships, thereby improving student learning outcomes. Finally, literature suggests that to establish high-quality relationships with children, teachers must be not only knowledgeable and offer rigorous assessment and instruction but also be highly attuned to individual student's signals and needs (Becker, Gallagher & Whitaker, 2017).

Psychologist and neuroscience researcher Kirke Olson (2014) argues that in many educational settings, there are, in fact, two distinct classrooms that exist simultaneously: the visible and the invisible. The visible classroom consists of observable measurements, such as the graded homework, tests, essays, and projects that define data-driven secondary schools. The invisible classroom, however, houses the hidden human connections among individuals that create the context for teaching and learning. These connections exist not only among students but also between students and their teachers. Thus, teacher-student relationships and interpersonal communications are vital tenets of student success (Bernstein-Yamashiro & Noam, 2013). The data that emerged in this study suggest that mindfulness practice may help teachers understand the invisible classroom and, thereby, prioritize creating high-quality relationships with students.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

The study of mindfulness in the context of secondary education is expanding day-by-day. This study synthesized the experiences of nine practitioners, uncovering shared experiences of what it means to be a mindfulness practitioner in the role of a secondary teacher. Yet, the results of this qualitative study suggest opportunities for further investigation. To extend or deepen the findings of this phenomenological study, future

qualitative researchers may approach mindfulness in secondary teachers from a life history or ethnographic lens, with the “intent to capture one person’s interpretation of his or her life” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016, p. 3) as a mindfulness practitioner in the role of secondary teacher. According to Sparapani, Seo, and Smith (2011), ethnographic researchers “live” in a “participants’ situation” and have the opportunity to “purposefully talk to people” to “get a sense of what life is like in that culture” (p. 55). Focusing on fewer, perhaps only one or two, mindfulness practitioners as they move in and out of their classrooms and interact with students may shed further light on the broad reach of mindfulness in the context of secondary schools. Further, future inquiries might investigate the longer-term influence of teacher mindfulness practice. Anecdotally, participants believe students are retaining the knowledge of mindfulness techniques along with a perception that mindfulness is a helpful and healthy approach to life. Several participants reported getting feedback from students, months and even years later, marking mindfulness as one of their greatest class learnings. A subsequent study may invite students who were enrolled in secondary classes which practiced mindfulness to share whether and to what extent mindfulness has offered discernible short and long-range benefits and eventually become part of each student’s life.

Second, existing literature suggests that mindfulness may foster a teacher’s ability to buffer the negative conditions experienced by secondary students during their early childhood. Although it is beyond the scope of this study, future research may explore how secondary teachers are well-positioned to observe and to cultivate strategies that respond to student suffering. Additionally, a phenomenological or case-study of secondary teachers who meet the criterion of believing in the benefit of integrating mindfulness practice into curriculum and/or lessons, yet do not currently implement mindfulness into their classroom,

could shed additional light on barriers in creating mindful schools. Finally, teacher narratives in the current study highlighted positive teacher-student interactions on a granular level, micro-moments so to speak, in which teachers connected to their mindfulness practices. By analyzing micro-moments from students' perspectives, possibly via student critical incident reports, further research may reveal whether mindful moments have acted as pivotal discovery events that changed the trajectory of students' paths.

### **Concluding Remarks and Reflection**

Together, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory and interpersonal neurobiology created a lens through which the data could be interpreted. From the participants' perspectives, mindfully aware teachers are attuned to both their own inner worlds and to the inner world of their students. Even when teachers did not necessarily formally teach mindfulness building strategies, for example, breathing as a class for the first two minutes of the period, the teacher participants still perceive their own mindfulness practice as shifting the thinking and the behaviors of students. Yet, it was also discovered that when the participants intentionally created space in their curriculum and in their limited 40-minute classes to invite students to practice together, teachers perceived an even greater likelihood that mindfulness became a teacher and a student trait. In alignment with biological systems theory, as the students interact with other teachers and with other students who are in their microsystems, the state of the school is affected. Therefore, mindfulness impacts the development of the individual student, the classroom environment, the overall culture of the school.

Exploration of teacher narratives and of the work toward building a model for interpreting the influence of teacher mindful awareness has deepened the researcher's

insight into the phenomenon of mindfulness in the context of secondary education. Each of the participants came to secondary teaching because they wanted to add value to the lives of adolescents, and they see their role as both rewarding and challenging. The essence of being a secondary educator is having a short amount of time to accomplish a significant amount of work. From the perspective of some participants, it also includes acknowledging that students enter their classroom with a whole day of experiences for which he or she has no context. For the most part, every 40 minutes, students must transition to a new classroom with a new teacher and to a new group of 25 or more classmates, which creates an entirely new dynamic for the student to navigate. The essence of a secondary teacher who practices mindfulness is having a strategy, although not perfect, for showing students that they matter, they are safe, and they belong, despite the busy and sometimes chaotic tempo of a day in a middle school or high school.

One of the primary objectives of the study was to accurately define the concept of “teacher presence” and the role it plays in developing relationships with students and in establishing climate in a classroom. As participants shared their stories, the researcher frequently wondered and asked, *How is this not simply good teaching or even just an example of being a kind person?* and, *How does this teaching approach, this way of dealing with students, connect to mindfulness?* It was discovered early in the investigation that it is impossible, and maybe not even helpful, to separate the practice from the person. In fact, as the study progressed, the researcher became increasingly convinced that the study’s objective would not be to prove that mindfulness practice causes X behaviors which leads to Y outcomes. Instead, the objective would be to vividly bring to light educators’ perceptions of how their mindful awareness relates to the way

they interconnect with secondary students and what they believe to be the implications of those interactions for the field of education.

What was discovered by the conclusion of this study is that teachers who embody mindful awareness in their teaching are present not only to their students, but also to their own teaching. Mindfulness practice helps teachers quiet down their internal world (e.g. stressful morning commute, losing their wallet, forgetting to make lunch for their own children, a previous conflict with a student). Through their narratives, participants shared how they consciously choose to set aside their own challenges and stresses and intentionally bring renewed and positive energy to their work. This requires seeing their students with fresh eyes and having what is known in the realm of mindfulness as *the beginner's mind*. Each day, the mindful teacher sees the student as a new person, and so students' behavior or performance the day before does not necessarily matter nor does it dictate how the teacher experiences and interacts with the student in that moment. While they use different tools and techniques to do so, the participants each attempt to intensely focus on students and to be emotionally flexible with them, such as meeting students where they are and not where the teacher thinks they should be.

At times, participants attempted to tease out whether experiences were examples of being mindfully aware rather than simply an aspect of their personalities. As they talked through the differences and grappled with whether those differences mattered, several teacher participants understood that mindfulness is about being aware, but it is also about acting on that awareness with purpose. The essence of these participants' mindful presence includes intentionally creating emotionally and academically safe places. Although they used different language to describe their experiences, their overall

perception is that teacher mindfulness matters since it slows the teacher down long enough to focus attention on students, which leads to less reactive, more compassionate interactions. For the teacher participants, stretching the time between the stimulus, which is often a student behavior, and the teacher's response is key.

Perhaps one of the most significant findings from this study is that secondary teachers who practice mindfulness understand that people communicate without words. When teachers and students interact, the still developing adolescent harnesses to his or her teacher's energy, whether that energy is positive or negative. Thus, teachers are accountable for the energy they bring to their interactions with students. It seems that a teacher's capability to recognize thought patterns and to manage a wide range of emotions are at the core of positive relationships with students and with establishing and sustaining environments that foster student learning. Mindful awareness is, as Erin said, keeping the relationship with students always somewhere "in the front and the back of the mind," and when the priority shifts away from the students' overall well-being, noticing that shift and consciously "resetting."

The most rewarding aspect of this research inquiry was witnessing the participants generate new insights as they conversed. From a phenomenological perspective, *meaning making* was most apparent as participants grappled with potential barriers to creating schools in which faculty, staff, and students have internalized mindfulness, and where mindfulness has become part of the very fabric of the building. During the focus group, the teachers showed the widest range of emotion, from confusion, to concern, to frustration, as they discussed what seems to be heightening levels of student stress and anxiety. Although it cannot be generalized to the larger

population of secondary teachers, these participants were cautiously optimistic. Perhaps this is due to their collective passion for mindfulness and their confidence that it could ameliorate their students' struggles. In sum, teacher participants agreed that most of their colleagues genuinely care for students, are in search of strategies to support students, and recognize the pivotal role teacher-student relationships play in students' overall success.

In many ways, pressures endured by students today have created the perfect storm. Students are experiencing an overload of academic and extracurricular work which often extends year-round. Overuse of technology and social media and the spate of high-profile shootings may also be contributing to students' concern about dangers lurking around the corner. However, strong teacher-student relationships could stem the rising tide of student stress, anxiety, and depression. From the perspective of the secondary educator participants, mindfulness has potential to support students' emotional growth, enhance teacher-student connections, and create more optimal learning environments. Although difficult to define and even more complicated to measure, the participants experience mindfulness practice as playing an integral role in their ability to make a positive difference in the lives of their students.

## Appendix A: Institutional Review Board Approval



Federal Wide Assurance: FWA00009066

Dec 9, 2019 12:57 PM EST

PI: Margaret Dunne  
CO-PI: Elizabeth Gil  
Ed Admin & Instruc Leadership

Re: Expedited Review - Initial - **IRB-FY2020-219** *THE INFLUENCE OF MINDFULNESS ON TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS, CLASSROOM CLIMATE, AND SCHOOL CULTURE: SECONDARY EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES*

Dear Margaret Dunne:

The St John's University Institutional Review Board has rendered the decision below for *THE INFLUENCE OF MINDFULNESS ON TEACHER-STUDENT RELATIONSHIPS, CLASSROOM CLIMATE, AND SCHOOL CULTURE: SECONDARY EDUCATORS' PERSPECTIVES*. The approval is effective from December 6, 2019 through December 4, 2020

Decision: Approved

PLEASE NOTE: If you have collected any data prior to this approval date, the data needs to be discarded.

Selected Category: 7. Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.

Sincerely,

Raymond DiGiuseppe, PhD, ABPP  
Chair, Institutional Review Board  
Professor of Psychology

Marie Nitopi, Ed.D.  
IRB Coordinator



**Appendix B : Participant Demographics Matrix (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008)**

Participant Code	Pseudonym	Gender	Years as a Secondary Educator	Years as a Mindfulness Practitioner	Discipline Taught	Brief Description of Practice
1						
2						
3						
4						
5						
6						
7.						
8.						
9.						

### **Appendix C: Consent**

St. John's University  
School of Education

September, 2019

Dear Educator,

You have been invited to take part in a research study to learn more about how teacher mindful awareness influences interactions with students, classroom climate and possibly the culture of the school. The study will be conducted by Margaret Dunne, a doctoral candidate at St. John's University School of Education. Her faculty sponsor is Dr. Elizabeth Gil, St. John's University School of Education.

As you know, secondary students are experiencing stress, anxiety, depression, and childhood trauma at increasing rates. As a mindfulness practitioner, your participation in this study will assist me in learning about the value of mindfulness in an educational setting. If you agree to participate in this study, you will be asked to:

1. Complete a questionnaire about your background (gender, discipline, years in education, mindfulness practice)
2. Take part in one 45-minute interview, either in person or via video-conferencing, about the ways you perceive your mindfulness practice influencing interactions with students and establishing the climate of your classroom.
3. Participate in one 60-minute focus group, either in person or via video-conferencing, to discuss with the researcher and the study participants your perceptions of mindful schools.

The interviews and focus groups will be audio-taped. During each phase of the study, you have the right to not answer any questions you prefer not to answer. Your responses will be kept confidential with the following exception: the researcher's mentor, Dr. Elizabeth Gil, will read the transcripts and/or notes from the transcripts, in part or in whole; the researcher is required by law to report to the appropriate authorities, suspicion of harm to yourself, to children, or to others. Your responses will be kept confidential by the researcher, but the researcher cannot guarantee that others in the group will do the same. Inquiries regarding this policy may be made to the principal investigator or, alternatively, the Human Subjects Review Board (718-990-1440).

There are no known risks associated with your participation in this research beyond those of everyday life. Although you will receive no direct benefits, this research will help the investigator better understand how mindfulness comes to bear in teacher-student interactions and shapes the learning environment and culture of a school. Thank you for offering your invaluable perspective.

Sincerely,  
Margaret Dunne  
St. John's University  
School of Education  
Department of Administration and Supervision  
Margaret.Dunne17@stjohns.edu

Agreement to Participate

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NAME

---

DATE

Consent to be Audiotaped

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NAME

---

DATE

**Appendix D: Critical Incident Instrument (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008)****Critical Incident Report**

In 2 paragraphs, please recall and reflect on one or two particular occasions that catalyzed your current mindfulness practice. What was going on for you at that time? What was your perception of how mindfulness might benefit you?

## Appendix E: Secondary Educator Interview Protocol

### Part 1:

1. On your *Critical Incident Report*, you spoke about the event or events that catalyzed or marked in some way the beginning of your mindfulness practice. Is there anything you would like to add to your description of those experiences?

### Part 2:

2. I'd like to bring that conversation to the present. How would you describe your current mindfulness practice? Are there specific strategies you use to cultivate your mindful awareness?

3. When did you first notice, if ever, the influence of your mindfulness practice on your interactions with students?

4. Do you explicitly teach or talk to students about mindfulness? For example, do you talk to students about the benefits of mindfulness or about your own experiences with mindful awareness? Do you share specific techniques for students to use to develop their own mindfulness? If so, tell me more about your approach.

5. Walk me through a specific interaction with a student when you felt that your mindfulness practice showed through or manifested in some way. What was the context? What was said? What was the outcome?

6. Why do you think your mindfulness made a difference in that situation?

7. Can you think of a challenging time with a student when your mindfulness did not seem to help? What was going on there? From your perspective, what got in the way?

8. Are there any additional experiences you'd like to share regarding a time when your mindfulness either did or did not make a difference in an interaction with a student?

9. Now please think about your educational space more generally. Could you offer a few adjectives to describe the tone or climate of that setting? (Note: teachers will be asked to describe classrooms, all non-teaching participants will be asked to describe the setting or environment in which they work).

10. Walk me through one or two specific times when you perceived your mindfulness in the overall tone or climate of your classroom (or educational space).

### Part 3: Thank you and Next Steps

Thank you for sharing your experiences. As a secondary teacher and a mindfulness practitioner, your insights are invaluable. Before I include information from our interview in my dissertation, I will share with you my research notes. At that time, you

may feel free to modify or omit any of your statements to ensure they capture your perceptions accurately and fully. I will be in touch with you over the next few weeks to invite you to participate in the final phase of my study: a focus group of participants during which we will discuss the implications for mindfulness on school culture. Thank you again for your time.

## **Appendix F: Focus Group Protocol**

### **Part One: Welcome and Introduction of Participants**

Thank you for joining me again to explore what it means to be a mindfulness practitioner in the context of our critical role as secondary educators. Phase 1 of the study invited you to reflect on the origins of your mindfulness practice. In Phase 2 when I met with you individually, I asked you to share your perception of how your mindful awareness influences your interactions with students and if and in what way your practice shapes the climate of your classroom. The goal of this focus group is to deepen that conversation by turning our attention to mindfulness in schools. I'd like to remind you of the importance of respecting the privacy of each of us by not sharing without permission what is discussed in the next hour.

Capturing your perspective accurately is one of my primary goals. Consequently, I will record this session on my phone and also take some notes. If I intend to incorporate something you said into my final dissertation, you will have the opportunity to first review what I have written and make suggestions.

Could we please go around the room and introduce ourselves by sharing a brief introduction that includes some details about your mindfulness practice and about your role as a secondary educator.

### **Part Two: School Culture**

1. To you, what is a mindful school?
2. What essential characteristics or qualities does a mindful school embody?
3. What do you perceive as the greatest benefit of bringing mindfulness into schools? Please think about the benefits to teachers, to students, and to the community.
4. What do you perceive as obstacles to incorporating mindfulness into schools? How might we— as part of the faculty— help to overcome these barriers?
5. To you, what needs to be in place in a school for mindfulness to take hold? Think about any systems or structures that might create or support mindfulness in education.

### **Part 3: Thank you and Next Steps.**

Thank you for sharing your experiences today. I hope you are as inspired by the people in this room as I am. Before I include information from our focus group in my dissertation, I will share with you my research notes. At that time, you may feel free to modify or omit any of your statements to ensure they capture your perceptions accurately and fully.

**Appendix G: *Participant Interview: Location and Duration***

Name	Interview Location	Interview Length
Jessica	In person	30:13
Tess	In person	28:14
Erin	In person	25:10
Becca	Videoconference	34:17
Kate	Videoconference	52:02
Rachel	Videoconference	43:14
Paul	In person	23:23
Dave	Videoconference	22:44
Tommy	In person	25:19



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